

**Blogging While Black and British:  
An Exploratory Study on the Use of Blogs as  
Social, Cultural and Counterhegemonic  
Practice**

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## List of Bloggers

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Blog Topic
TINA	40	F	BC	Hair & Beauty
LUCRECIA	49	F	BC	Hair & Beauty
TRACY	50	F	BC	Creative Writing
CAROLINE	44	F	BC	Arts & Culture
LUCINDA	44	F	BC	Technology
CHRISTINE	26	F	BC	Hair & Beauty
GLORIA	27	F	BC	Arts & Culture
NADINE	31	F	BC	Wedding & Bridal
MITCHELL	44	M	BC	News/Current Affairs/Race
CHARMAINE	32	F	BA	Dating and Relationships
NORMA	28	F	BC	Creative Writing
LORRAINE	33	F	BC	Social Issues
DANIELLE	33	F	BC	Food
FUMI	29	F	BA	Creative Writing/ Books
ROBERTA	23	F	BA	Fashion, Hair and Beauty
NANCY	33	F	BC	Career & lifestyle
AUDREY	22	F	BA	Hair & Beauty
CHIOMA	48	F	BA	Race/Gender/Politics
JENNIFER	28	F	BA	Business
LILIAN	32	F	BC	Lifestyle
BEVERLEY	32	F	BA	Social commentary
ISAAC	35	M	BC	Sports
JULIA	21	F	BC	Fashion
ADRIAN	30	M	BC	Social commentary
ODERA	27	F	BA	Fashion
MICHAELA	44	F	BC	Business
LUTHER	43	M	BC	Social commentary
EMANUELLA	42	F	BA	Lifestyle
LEONA	29	F	BA	Arts & Culture/Africa
GRACE	35	F	BA	Creative Writing

BA = Black African

BC = Black Caribbean

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an exploratory study on how people of African descent in the UK use blogs as social, cultural and counterhegemonic practice and is positioned within the theoretical frameworks of alternative media and critical race theory (CRT). The research questions at the centre of this study are what motivates African Caribbean people in the UK to become bloggers; what gratification they experience through authoring blogs; how they use blogs to address issues of representation in the mainstream media and their perceptions of the social impact of their activities as bloggers. The findings reveal that motivation for blogging is linked to voice, visibility and empowerment and gratification is linked to voice, knowledge sharing, knowledge acquisition and social interaction. While voice, as a motivational factor and gratification for some participants is linked to interests in creative writing and journalism, for many others motivation and gratification are driven by a complex set of factors linked to issues of race and representation. These stem from feelings of being voiceless, invisible and marginalised as African Caribbean people in British society and blogs function as an assertive strategy and medium for self-representation. The constructed narratives of the bloggers who participated in this study reveal their experience of subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination perpetuated through dominant discourses in the mainstream media and marginalisation in the wider society. The findings demonstrate that race and ethnicity are inextricably linked to motivation and gratification and influence blogging practice and content production. This thesis expands on current literature by documenting how African Caribbean people have appropriated blogs to harness social and cultural capital, to mediate against racism and marginalisation within British society and to empower themselves and their communities.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This study is motivated by a need to understand how African Caribbean people in the UK use blogs as social, cultural and counterhegemonic practice and their use of the blogosphere as an alternative online space. While there is a growing body of research on the blogosphere, the use of blogs by ethnic minority groups in the UK is an under-developed area of inquiry. Researching blog use by African Caribbean people contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the blogosphere and complements existing research on internet studies and the impact of race and ethnicity in processes of cultural production. Data collected by OFCOM (2008) reveals higher levels of media production among the African and Caribbean populations than the UK population as a whole. This study is an incremental step towards uncovering some of the reasons that attract these groups to media production. This research project focuses on four distinct areas: motivation, gratification, identity and representation in online spaces and the social impact of blogging. It explores how African Caribbean bloggers construct identities in online spaces and investigates how they use blogs to address issues of representation within the mainstream media. The scope of this study has been limited to blogs in order to facilitate in-depth analysis of multiple areas of inquiry not examined in previous studies on the blogosphere.

The term ‘blog’ derives from the word ‘weblog’ which refers to a chronological record of events. It was created in 1997 by American blogger John Barger; four years after the web became open to the general public through the first web browser, Mosaic. It was shortened to ‘blog’ in 1999 by Peter Merholz (Rettburg, 2008). Blogs are frequently referred to as online journals; however, the wide availability of free web services and software potentially widens their use for a variety of purposes. Within this study blogs are positioned within the theoretical framework of alternative media. While the term can be applied to a broad range of perspectives and practices; there is a consensual understanding amongst scholars that for a practice to be classed as alternative, it must occur outside the mainstream, be oppositional in structure and/or content, be community-focused, encourage interaction and participation and be non-professional, non-commercial and non-institutional. The blogs featured in this study are independently managed by the bloggers through channels of communication outside the mainstream.

Chapter two of this thesis reviews literature relevant to this research project organised thematically. It includes bloggers’ motivation and gratification and studies examining the use

of blogs. In approaching this study through the framework of critical race theory, literature around the impact of race and gender in the blogosphere and racist discourse in the mainstream media are also included. Counterhegemonic practice can be viewed as a form of online political participation hence the inclusion of literature that examines the growing use of the internet as a medium for discursive activism. It evaluates studies focused on newer forms of oppositional discourse previously regarded as apolitical, but which embody a shift away from party politics to personalised political activity.

Chapter three is a critical analysis of the blogosphere and examines its effectiveness as a medium for promoting collective advocacy and collective activism. It focuses on three distinct areas: the blogosphere and the public sphere, corporate hegemonies in cyberspace and collective advocacy and collective activism.

Chapter four highlights the rationale for the study by locating the medium of blogs within a broader social, political and historical context, in explaining the factors which differentiate blogs from other forms of social media. It also examines the social and political landscape in which the experiences of the bloggers as articulated through their narratives are situated, and how they influence their activities and practices within the blogosphere.

Chapter five documents the methodology and research methods used in this study. I am of the opinion that research focused on ethnic minorities should take into account their historical experience relative to their geographical location and be sensitive to how intersections of race, class and gender operate to confer multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage. This study has been approached with a set of guiding principles that have been integrated into the methodology to avoid common pitfalls, such as the tendency to problematize and objectify ethnic minorities and to regard their unique traits and characteristics as deficiencies, instead of social differences. The principles that guide this research project outlined in chapter four help to ensure that the study incorporates an emancipatory approach and that the voices of the participants are centred in the research.

Chapter six presents the preliminary findings from the questionnaire, providing a demographical profile of the bloggers and an insight into their blogging practices. It also presents quantitative data on the factors linked to gratification that provide a foundation for the qualitative aspect of this study.

Chapter seven presents qualitative findings from the interviews as the constructed narratives of the bloggers relating to motivation and gratification. CRT is employed as praxis to ensure that the voices of the participants are centred and privileged and the chapter features extracts from interviews interwoven with theoretical analysis.

Chapter eight is the second chapter presenting the qualitative findings from the interviews as narratives relating to the construction of blogging identities, cultivation of audiences, how the participants perceive and respond to mainstream representation of African Caribbean people and the importance they attach to social aims.

Chapter nine presents my own perceptions of various dimensions of blogging relating to motivation, gratification, identity, representation and social impact using a fusion of critical ethnography and autoethnography. In this chapter, I have undertaken cultural analysis through the constructed narratives of multiple others which I call the Activist, the Academic and the Fortysomething that intersect across raced, gendered and professional identities.

Chapter ten summarises the key findings of this study, assesses its contribution to new knowledge and the implications for future research.

The term *African Caribbean* as used in this thesis refers to people of African descent that are descendants of the African or Caribbean continents, including those of mixed heritage. It is the preferred term for this study as it locates the participants geographically and culturally and as it is most commonly used within the British context, it further delineates their cultural and geographical ties with Britain. The term *black* used in this research project refers to people of African descent including those of mixed heritage often racialised as black. It is most commonly used in this thesis where authors referenced have used the term and where study participants use the term to define themselves. While this terminology in relation to identity is highly contested (Marotta, 2001) and critiqued as essentialist (Hall, 1996), individuals have a human right to define their own identities and while this process constitutes a subjective reality, it is inextricably linked with individual agency. Given that the approach to this study is centred on CRT as both theory and praxis, self-naming is an important strategy in privileging the voices of the participants. There is no presumption of homogeneity as it is widely accepted that differences within this group exist in terms of culture, class, gender, age, sexuality and geographical location. Racial and ethnic markers are recognised as social constructs and it is acknowledged here that identities are not static. Individuals are constantly reconfiguring and renegotiating their identities (Anthias, 2004;

Back & Solomos, 2000; Deuze, 2006; Hall, 1996; Marotta, 2001; Modood, 1994) and all individuals have fluid, multiple identities enacted in different contexts (Gee, 2010). 'Ethnic minority' is also used in this thesis to refer to non-white minority groups in the UK. In differentiating between race and ethnicity for the purpose of clarity, both are socially constructed terms. However, while race refers to physical differences such as skin colour, ethnicity is generally associated with cultural identity. The term ethnicity is equally problematic since racialised minorities are categorised into ethnic groups by the dominant culture and ethnicity represents a location of difference and subordination relative to the white majority population in the UK, whose ethnicity is naturalised by the power of hegemonic whiteness (Anthias, 2001). However, it is used sparingly and acknowledged as a contested term.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This literature review has been organised thematically with each section representing a topic of major relevance to the research project; drawing on different theoretical and conceptual frameworks that are best examined separately. However, together they help to form a composite picture, highlighting existing research and revealing areas within the discipline that warrant further exploration. Section 2.1 reviews key texts on alternative media to demonstrate its relevance as an appropriate theoretical framework for critical studies on blogging. Section 2.2 reviews key studies on blogs and traditional areas of blog research such as uses, gratification and motivations. Section 2.3 reviews studies on bloggers of African descent and examines studies on gender disparities within the blogosphere and intersections of race and gender. Section 2.4 reviews literature that places the experience of African Caribbean people within a historical context that takes account of racialised representations and racist discourse perpetuated through the mainstream media. Section 2.5 examines key texts relating to theories on the democratization of the media and its implications for increased access through participatory and horizontal modes of communication. It also reviews literature that reflects a growing interest in alternative forms of online political participation and new concepts on what type of activities constitute political thought and action. This leads to recent literature on discursive practices such as blogging that are increasingly viewed as counterhegemonic projects that may be radical in orientation rather than content.

### **2.1 Alternative media as a theoretical framework for critical studies on blogging**

This section explores the use of alternative media as a theoretical framework for critical studies on blogging. The term ‘alternative media’ can apply to a broad range of theoretical perspectives and practices and because of this ambiguity the term has often been denounced as meaningless (Atton, 2001b; Hamilton, 2000). However, there is sufficient consensus on the characteristics that define alternative media practice to link alternative media theory to certain types of blogging practices. For example, it has been argued that online spaces like the blogosphere function as an alternative public sphere where individuals and groups can challenge hegemonic media power by contesting mainstream discourse (Moyo, 2011). In this regard, blogging as a social practice can be linked to alternative media practice through three strands, which will be discussed here: non-mainstream, radical and participatory.

There is a general consensus that what most defines alternative media is that it is produced outside mainstream media institutions, corporations and networks and should be produced by non-professional practitioners. Often the main motivation for alternative media practitioners is to prioritise the interests of marginalised groups and to bring into the public domain the perspectives of those whose voices are excluded from the corporate-dominated mainstream media (Atton and Hamilton, 2008; Harcup, 2003; Lievrouw, 2011). Some scholars have argued that the production processes are equally if not more important than the content produced, since the collective nature of alternative media projects is in itself a resistance to the hierarchical structures of corporate mainstream media institutions. Thus, Atton (2001a) argues that to be distinguished from the mainstream media, alternative media must be non-professional, non-profit making and non-institutionalized. According to Harcup (2003: 356) the non-professional nature of alternative media is its defining principle and should be regarded as ‘a strength rather than a weakness’. He argues that collectively, where audiences become media producers, especially in the news arena, they can subvert dominant discourses in the corporate dominated mainstream media. Whilst this view may appear somewhat optimistic, there is merit in the claim that the real value of alternative media practice is in its ability to contest ideological spaces in the mainstream media where ideas circulate and opinions are formed (Lievrouw, 2011: 372). This can be viewed as another strategy for challenging hegemony—by demonstrating ‘that there are alternative ways of seeing the world and other stories to be told’. Independently owned blogs are managed individually or collectively outside the mainstream media through bloggers’ own channels of communication leaving them free from the bureaucratic constraints of corporate media and the conventions of professional practitioners to organise, structure and produce content on their own terms.

Blogging has been described as a new form of writing that is unique to the web and which underlines the fact journalism is constantly evolving and has adapted to a new medium (Matheson, 2004). It is characterised by a resistance to professional journalistic practice, a preference for less formalised language and the rejection of the journalistic principle of objectivity in favour of more opinionated writing. Whilst research indicates that the majority of blogs are used as a means of personal expression, some blogs do employ some of the elements of professional journalism by selecting current issues and offering their own analysis and commentary (Lasica, 2003). Certain elements of blogs can be of particular benefit to marginalised groups like ethnic minorities, who turn to blogs to address some of the shortcomings within the mainstream news media. Blogs allow users to write about issues

that are excluded or poorly reported in the mainstream news media (Gant, 2007; Papacharissi, 2007; Rettburg, 2008) and can sometimes extend the life of a news story. By offering critiques of stories written in the mainstream news media and offering different perspectives and insights, stories can be extended within the blogosphere well beyond the day or two's coverage they might otherwise receive (Gant, 2007; Reese *et al*, 2007; Rettburg, 2008).

Blogs also provide a platform for individuals and groups to challenge mainstream news discourse in their function as social networks. Even on the internet, the mainstream news media may be dominated by corporations and conglomerates, which is evidenced by the stories most featured on aggregator sites like Google News and Yahoo News (Reese *et al* 2007). However, mainstream news organisations rarely link to other news sites as they are largely financial competitors, but linking between blogs is a defining feature of the blogosphere. Whilst a single blog may draw but a tiny fraction of the audiences on mainstream news sites, it may be linked to other blogs which extends its audience. Blog posts can also reach larger audiences through readers sharing the posts on social networking sites like Facebook and through being listed on blog aggregator sites like Technorati or Blogged. Topic-driven blogs have clearly blurred the divisions between bloggers and professional journalists (Matheson, 2004) with some scholars seeing blogging as supplementary to professional journalism (Reese *et al*, 2007) and others seeing blogging as complementing the work of professional journalists (Lasica, 2003). However, it is clear that as blogging continues to evolve it will continue to redefine the everyday practices of journalism (Matheson, 2004). Gant (2007) argues that journalism has evolved from being a restrictive profession dominated by the white middle class to an activity that anyone can engage in. A study by Baresch *et al* (2011) found that bloggers who regard their work as a form of journalism are more likely to write about public affairs, inform and influence their readers and behave more like a traditional journalist by posting sources, checking facts and editing. However, there was a deviation from the traditional conventions of journalism in terms of a motivation for self-expression. It could be argued that this is another stage in the evolutionary process of journalism. However, other studies show that bloggers who see themselves as journalists are in the minority, with only 34% of bloggers regarding their blogs as a form of journalism (Fox & Lenhart, 2006). Therefore, blogs are a long way off from subverting the journalistic landscape, although they still have an important role to play within the news media in providing alternative sources of news from a personalised perspective, and in adding a greater plurality of voices to the mainstream, corporate-dominated media.



The concept of radical media can be found in the work of Downing (2001) who applies Gramsci's theory of hegemony to the media. The term 'hegemony' describes the political and economic dominance of one group over another, maintained by the ability of the dominant group to project its view of the world so that the subordinated group comes to accept its subordinated position in society as both common sense and natural. Hegemonies are not static and change in response to prevailing conditions, underlining a constant ideological struggle between the dominant and the dominated. Using this conceptual framework, Downing applies the term 'counter hegemony' to refer to radical media; that offers alternative discourses to the mainstream offerings and that opposes the dominant structures of the media.

Radical media...have a mission not only to provide facts to public denied them but to explore fresh ways of developing a questioning perspective on the hegemonic process and increasing the public's sense of confidence in its power to engineer constructive change.' (Downing, 2001:16)

A study of bloggers in Zimbabwe blogging about human rights abuses and state violence during the presidential run-off campaign in 2008 exemplifies how ordinary citizens through the practice of blogging engaged in a process that both questioned and challenged state hegemonic power. Moyo (2011:753) argues that the language used by bloggers reflected anger against the status quo and was an act of resistance against a dictatorship. As such, the bloggers were activist in orientation, suggesting that 'activism in the sense of advocating radical social change must be a key attribute of alternative media'.

Blogs provide an opportunity for ordinary people, and especially marginalised groups to tell their own stories and monitor, analyse, evaluate, discuss and challenge corporate media power. Hegemonic struggles are expressed through the disruption of dominant ideologies through 'discursive practices of resistance.' (Bailey et al, 2008) which through the diversity of formats offers the opportunity for experimentation with content. It can be argued that although alternative media is often conceptualised in terms of being purely oppositional or defined purely in terms of critical content, a more useful approach is one that encompasses the value of participating in alternative media practice for the users themselves. Such approaches must acknowledge that the term 'alternative' reflects the heterogeneous, fluid and experimental nature of alternative media and the fact that it cannot be limited to one particular definition such as radical, or participatory. Rather it is more realistic to accept that alternative media encompasses a range of different structures and practices that are

sometimes interlinked and which are components within a complex media system that includes both professional, non-professional, radical and cultural elements.

Murphy (2004) argues that global systems of western domination are continually being resisted and contested, and alternative forms of journalism facilitated through ICTs are such examples. Since the internet reproduces existing inequalities present in traditional forms of media, cyberspace has become another medium through which struggles for social justice are waged. Murphy studied 'social justice cyberspace' as a medium for alternative journalistic discourses about Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. His findings reveal that these networks produced and circulated more diverse content about Africa than all the commercial and non-commercial internet sources combined. This demonstrates that whilst alternative media practice may not in itself address the domination of hegemonic structures in cyberspace, it still presents a challenge to the dominant discourse by adding to the plurality of voices within the media (Atton, 2001a).

Participatory media is premised on the idea that individuals can be empowered through their involvement in alternative media production (Atton, 2001a). However, it is probably the most ambiguous of all terms used to describe alternative media practice because it can refer both to community-based projects carried out autonomously by non-professional practitioners, and to media projects led by professionals (Deuze et al, 2007). Fuchs & Sandoval (2010) argue that conceptualising alternative media as participatory and non-mainstream is problematic, since much of the focus has been centred on alternative media structures and production processes that are collectively organised and produced by non-professionals, and which operate on a not-for-profit basis. Their contention is that many alternative media platforms that conform to this definition are not politically progressive and have been used to promote far-right and conservative agendas. For this reason they argue that alternative media should be situated within a critical paradigm, with the minimum requirement for alternative media being critical content. Whilst they acknowledge the empowerment potential of participatory media for individuals who can become media producers, they argue that increased participation does not by itself challenge the power of media oligarchs nor drown out the dominant discourses in the corporate news media. They argue that trying to maintain the ideal of operating alternative media as defined by non-commercial entities, within a capitalist system is futile. Such criteria mean that alternative media are often fragmented and lack the resources to gain public visibility. Thus:

Giving ordinary people a voice by opening up access to media production is not enough for a truly democratic media system to emerge. Participation remains very limited if people can only talk but are not heard. (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2010:144)

A further criticism of participatory media is that social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Google all extol the benefits of their free networking tools that facilitate the creation and sharing of online content and the development of online communities around shared interests. However, they have commodified their audiences who are sold to advertisers and exemplify how participatory media helps to maintain corporate media power, as well as challenge it. Realising the ideals of a democratic society requires challenging the dominant structures through critical media which ‘...make the judgement that structures of oppression and exploitation benefit certain classes and hence should be radically transformed by social struggles’(Fuchs & Sandoval 2010:146). By this definition, alternative media would include both commercially run and non-participatory media that produce critical content. The authors acknowledge the dangers of critical content producers being funded by commercial organisations, namely that content may become standardized under bureaucratic structures and that commercial interests may take precedence over editorial priorities, along with the risk of dependency on commercial funders. But perhaps it is a price worth paying ‘to step out from marginality and to increase the societal impact of alternative media’ (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2010:147). Whilst some pertinent points are raised here, the focus on alternative media purely as critical in content overlooks what Gabriel (1998:3) refers to as the emergence of ‘a new politics of representation’, where those excluded from the mainstream news media are able to engage in complex forms of cultural expression as a means of challenging dominant world views. This view is echoed by Atton (2001b) who advocates a theory of alternative media that is not only embedded in politically resistant forms, but also in other culturally based forms of communication facilitated by ICTs. Blogging is a cultural practice as well as a social practice that enables individuals to represent themselves and through their own representations challenge socially constructed raced and gendered identities that are reinforced through the mainstream media. Through this process of self-representation, individuals are acting in ways that are oppositional to the mainstream. Blogs also encompass participatory elements that through their commenting and linking features encourage audience interaction and participation and community formation. As outlined here, alternative media is a useful theoretical framework in which to position critical studies of blogs. This section has reviewed some of the literature on alternative media and linked theory to the

practice of blogging in order to demonstrate how blogs as cultural media products and blogging as a social and cultural practice, embody some of the key characteristics that define alternative media.

## **2.2 Blogs and bloggers: uses, gratification and motivations**

Blogs form part of a complex media system where audiences are also content producers (Lasica, 2003; Reese *et al*, 2007) and have grown exponentially in popularity in recent years. As at October 2011, according to Nielsenwire (2012) NM Incite tracked 181 million blogs around the world. Five years earlier in October 2006 the figure was just 36 million. This growing phenomenon provides scope for study in three distinct areas: usage, gratification and motivation. These areas of media inquiry are linked to uses and gratifications theory which first emerged during the 1970s. It is based on the assertion that there are various reasons why people use different types of media (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch (1974). Research that draws on uses and gratification theory aims to explain why people use certain types of media and the psychological needs that motivate their media use (Chung & Kim, 2008). However, it is not without limitations. For example, Morley (1992) argues against the assumption of a universal mass media with common values, emphasising the diversity of media audiences in terms of class, race, gender and other factors. This has a bearing on how individual audience members use and interpret media. In recent years, uses and gratification theory has been used to explore motivation and gratification of information communication technologies, with greater emphasis on the influence of culture on psychological needs and motivation (Ruggiero, 2000). With regard to blogs, studies have examined blog types (Rettburg, 2008) blog content (Herring *et al*, 2007; Papacharissi, 2007; Reese *et al*, 2007) and motivations for blogging (Huang *et al*, 2007; Kaye, 2007; Nardi *et al* 2004). Earlier studies have also explored the uses and gratification of websites as online tools of self-expression (Smith, 1998) and personal homepages as tools of self-definition and self-representation (Dominick, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b). It can be argued that much of the existing research on bloggers focus on psychological needs, with little critical attention being afforded to the use of blogs as a space for addressing issues of representation or their use in mediating against discursive forms of racism. This study therefore broadens the usual scope of inquiry to explore how blogs are used as a space to reconfigure and negotiate racialised identities within the blogosphere as a strategy for challenging stereotypical representation in the mainstream media.

Studies on blogs tend to focus on their classification and usage by blog authors. Rettburg (2008) identifies three main types of blogs: personalised blogs used primarily as online journals in which bloggers create posts about their everyday lives, sometimes referred to as 'personal musings'. Filter blogs are used primarily for sharing information by posting links to other blogs and websites and topic driven blogs focus on specific subjects and can sometimes be journalistic in nature. Most studies have found that the vast majority of blogs are personalised and used primarily as a means of personal expression (Herring *et al* 2004; Fox & Lenhart, 2006; Papacharissi, 2007; Technorati, 2011). Gurak & Antonijevic (2008) argue that blogs fulfil an essential element of human desire as a medium for the expression of identity, creating community and structuring present and past experiences. It could be argued that since identities are socially and culturally constructed, personalised blogs serve as a medium through which identities are constantly reconfigured and renegotiated, sometimes through the affirmation or contestation of mainstream representations of raced, classed and gendered identities. As a socially interactive medium, blogs enable the negotiation of identities through online communities formed around shared interests and experiences that can create a sense of belonging to a particular social or cultural group. Some studies have examined blog usage in terms of the people who read blogs to explore how audiences engage with blogs and to determine their main attraction. Such studies have found that the primary motivations for reading blogs relate to their unique characteristics in offering links to a wide variety of sources, commentary and analysis of news, and for personal fulfilment, finding blogs entertaining, fun and relaxing (Kaye, 2007). The interactive and participatory nature of blogs is also a prime factor, since blogs enable users both to read posts and to comment, offering their own analysis, and interacting with other like-minded users (Kaye, 2005).

Studies on bloggers primarily focus on their demographic profile and their motivations for authoring blogs. In their latest study Technorati (2011) identify five types of bloggers and link blogger types to the nature of their blogging activities. Hobbyists account for 60% of bloggers who blog for fun and use blogs as a form of personal expression. Professional bloggers blog both full and part-time and account for 18% of bloggers, using blogs primarily to supplement their income. Their blog content is still primarily focused on personal musings. Corporate bloggers make up 8% of the blogosphere and blog as part of their full-time job. Their content is mainly focused on business and technology. Entrepreneurs make up 13% of the blogosphere and blog for a company or business they own. They post content largely centred on their own industry. According to the Technorati survey, 60% of bloggers are men,

roughly one third are aged between 25 and 44 and around 44% are degree educated. A survey by Fox & Lenhart (2006) is unique in offering a large scale study of bloggers that also includes the ethnic backgrounds of bloggers. Their findings reveal that collectively, ethnic minority groups account for 40 per cent of US bloggers; demonstrating that bloggers are demographically very diverse. At present there are no such studies within the UK with which to assess how ethnic minority groups are engaging with this dynamic and evolving medium. Macafee & Pedersen's (2006) study of British Bloggers was based on a small sample of 48 bloggers and ethnicity was not a criterion for selection. Clearly in the UK there is a gap in existing scholarship on how ethnic minority groups are participating in the medium of blogging. Such studies could provide useful insights into how alternative media is consumed and produced within contemporary society by different ethnic groups. This has broader social and political implications for the future of the media in the UK, in light of the changing demographic landscape.

Studying bloggers' motivations is the key to 'understanding the blogging phenomenon' according to Huang *et al* (2007:472). Nardi *et al* (2004) originally identified five primary motivations for blogging: documenting life experiences, providing commentary and opinion, expressing deeply felt emotions, articulating ideas through writing and forming and maintaining community forums. Huang *et al* (2007) revised these motivations to: self-expression, life documenting, commenting, forum participating and information searching. They argue that these motivations often play out simultaneously, since most bloggers are driven to blog by a mix of motivations rather than a single factor. The significance of Huang *et al's* study is in linking the motivations of bloggers to blogging activities, or behavioural orientations. They argue that there are two behavioural orientations of blogging: information search and social interaction. Their study found that the social interaction orientation is linked to motivations of self-expression, life documenting and commenting. Whilst the information search orientation is linked to motivations of commenting, forum participation and information seeking. They make the important observation that although the majority of bloggers use blogs as a means of personal expression, there is also an underlying motivation in affirming their identities for the purpose of social interactions through virtual communities. Papacharissi's (2007) analysis of blogs found that the primary motivation for bloggers was personal expression and that the blogs were created for an intended audience mainly of family and friends. The widespread use of blogs for personal expression is also documented

in Fox & Lenhart's (2006) large scale study on US bloggers which found that 52 per cent of bloggers see their blogging as a form of creative expression.

### **2.3 Race and gender in the blogosphere**

Outside the UK, studies involving bloggers of African descent have demonstrated that the blogosphere can function as an alternative public sphere through which counter hegemonic discourse takes place and where alternative perspectives and opinions are formulated, nurtured and sustained (Moyo, 2011). Bloggers of African descent have more recourse to address issues of representation within the mainstream media, whether this is on the basis of a lack of representation, or misrepresentations of this group, and to use blogs as an expression of their cultural identity. A study by Pole (2005) on African American political bloggers found that topics most mentioned were race and ethnicity, party politics and campaign elections. More than half the bloggers said their motivation for blogging was to fill gaps in the mainstream media and that even when blogging about general issues, they sought to emphasise how issues affect African Americans. Of great significance however, was that the majority of respondents said that their intended audience was fellow African Americans. This view underlines their perceptions of a segregated blogosphere in the US in which they are afforded less importance than white bloggers and in which issues of importance to them are ignored. Race was said to be a factor in the study by Pole (2005) because respondents felt that blogs authored by African Americans were less popular than those authored by whites and that introducing issues of race on white liberal blogs were fraught with difficulties. Many of the African American bloggers felt uncomfortable doing so for fear of reprisals. As a consequence, most of the respondents in the study said they were mostly in contact with other African Americans, demonstrating little interaction between African Americans and white bloggers. These views were echoed in an article by Celine De Leon (2007) that revealed African American bloggers who are open about their racial identity on blogs and who tackle racial issues are often bombarded with negative emails and comments from white bloggers. A 25-year old African American blogger complained about receiving personalised emails attacking her character, rather than focusing on content. The blogger said she felt that white liberals often disregard what African Americans have to say and think they know better. Pole's later study (2009) examined different examples of African American bloggers uniting around specific incidents of racism. In one case study Pole demonstrates how in the case of Don Imus, a white American shock jock who made racist remarks about African American women, the community of African American political bloggers united to expose and

challenge this act of racism. Their blog posts calling for the resignation of Imus shifted the discourse outside the realm of the black blogosphere and into the wider political blogging landscape. In the wake of a tide of negative publicity, Imus tendered his resignation. This demonstrates that the activities of African American political bloggers can help to set the agenda in the wider news media and can have a social impact in the wider society. Pole's (2005, 2009) studies are important in demonstrating how African Americans use blogs to mobilise their communities around political campaigns, encourage political participation and challenge overt incidents of racism. However, there is a need to build on this type of research by investigating alternative forms of political activism such as discursive forms of resistance through personalised blogs that necessitates a broader definition of political thought and action.

Despite the dearth of research on ethnic minority bloggers, the small scale studies that have been undertaken in the US and the articulation of experiences by African American bloggers demonstrate that far from being a democratic space that fosters inclusivity and participation, racial segregation exists to some extent, within the American blogosphere. As a reaction to marginalisation within the blogosphere, the term 'Afrosphere' has emerged to delineate the space within the blogosphere reserved for African Americans and people of African descent in the wider Diaspora. This led to the formation of 'Afrospear' a movement of African peoples whose aims are to form a community of progressive bloggers, not just within the US but also in the wider African Diaspora. The circumstances surrounding its formation underline the exclusion of African American bloggers not only within the blogosphere, but also within American society. In September 2006, former President Bill Clinton met with a group of political bloggers in Harlem, which has a large African American community. All of the bloggers at the meeting were white (Sifry, 2006). The African American political blogging community were deeply offended by their exclusion and discussions that followed between prominent African American bloggers subsequently led to the formation of Afrospear. Later on, a smaller ad-hoc group of African American bloggers formed a collective blog called *AfroSpear* (Wikipedia). The tagline on its blog reads 'A Think Tank for People of African Descent' and the founders, who are from four different countries across three continents, describe their blog as 'a work in progress.' *AfroSpear* is linked to more than 150 blogs, mostly within the US but also worldwide, demonstrating the inter-connectedness of blogs and their potential to reach audiences beyond geographical boundaries who have common interests.



The need for people of African descent to unite around shared struggles as an act of solidarity has been defined as a moral obligation. The prominent African American blogger Chris Rabb (2005, para. 13) states: 'We must blog while black. It is not a fad or a luxury; it is our civic responsibility to do so.' The term 'blogging while black' refers to blogging openly as person of African descent and tackling the issues of greatest concern and priority to African American communities. It also denotes that for African American bloggers, blogging about issues of major concern is seen as being part of a wider social movement for change:

Where the success of all previous grassroots movements has been measured by feet on the ground, the power and effectiveness of blog activism for black folk and other dispossessed communities will be measured by hands on the keyboard. (Rabb, 2005, para. 13).

The concept of a segregated blogosphere delineated by race has not been explored in studies on the blogosphere. However, it warrants further analysis to develop understanding on whether the concept of a black blogosphere exists outside the US, in Europe, for example, where people of African descent are minority populations.

The review of literature in this section as it relates to the overall focus of the study is concerned with gender disparities in the blogosphere that intersect with race for women bloggers of African descent. It is important to take account of gender in this analysis and how the combination of race and gender can result in differential experiences within the blogosphere. Despite the promise of the internet as a democratising medium (Enzensberger 1976; McQuail 1994; Hadl 2004), in reality the internet reproduces existing inequalities in the wider society, (Carroll & Hackett 2006; McChesney, 1998; 1999 Harp & Tremayne 2006). There is a lack of data on the number of blogs and bloggers in the UK; however, a study conducted by Fox & Lenhart (2006) reported that in the US 12 million adults had blogs, with women accounting for 46% and white bloggers making up 60% of the blogosphere. Other studies have shown that blogs authored by men are more popular (Chen, 2012; Gregg, 2006; Harp & Tremayne 2006; Herring *et al* 2004; Pedersen 2008) and receive more attention from the media and academic community (Herring *et al*, 2004). A study by Harp & Tremayne (2006) found that of a list of top thirty political bloggers only three were authored by women. Like the publishing world in general, women's voices are marginalised within the blogosphere. Studies show that one reason for male dominance in the blogosphere

is due to linking practices. A-list blogs are predominantly authored by men and tend to link to other A-list blogs, increasing their popularity (Herring *et al* 2004). A study by Pedersen (2008) found that male bloggers are more likely to be linked to on blogrolls and whilst women bloggers link evenly between male and female bloggers, male bloggers are more likely to link to other male bloggers.

Another reason for the dominance of white men in the blogosphere relates to their propensity for authoring blogs that are externally focused on politics, or filter blogs (Chen, 2012; Gregg, 2006; Harp & Tremayne 2006; Herring *et al* 2004; Pedersen 2008). A study by Herring *et al* (2004) that surveyed news articles about blogs found that men were mentioned in more articles than women, were mentioned earlier in articles than women, were more likely to be mentioned multiple times and were more likely to be referred to by name than women. Although they constituted a minority of the blogs, filter blogs and topic-focused blogs commanded most of the media attention. The study authors surmised that this could be because journalists might consider these type of blogs more newsworthy because of their external focus, which is closer to ‘hard news’ than personal blogs with their internal focus. However, this practice results in a definition of blogging that is based on a minority elite of white, male, bloggers. Furthermore, the selective focus on certain types of blogs results in a privileging of white male interests. The intense focus on political and filter blogs is all the more surprising given that personalised blogs outnumber political and filter blogs in the blogosphere. According to Fox & Lenhart’s (2006) study, 37% of bloggers blog about life and personal experiences compared with 11% that blog about politics. The popularity of political and filter blogs suggests that personalised blogs are not considered ‘serious writing’, receive less attention and are deemed to be of less value (Gregg, 2006; Herring *et al* 2004; Saleh, 2010). It has been argued that whilst political blogs command the most popularity in the blogosphere from the media and academic community, women are excluded from this popularity because of a lack of clarity over exactly what constitutes political thought and action (Keller, 2011). Politics is defined in a very narrow context (Saleh, 2010) so that only blogs that are explicitly focused on politics receive any attention (Gregg, 2006). However, ‘the success of blogging should not be judged solely on whether it generates obvious political effects,’ (Kahan & Kellner 2004). While these studies acknowledge gender disparities in the blogosphere, they do not address intersectional inequalities that exist on the basis of race and gender. The experience of Black women bloggers are therefore marginalised in theoretical discussions on gender pertaining to the blogosphere. The tendency to adopt a singular

approach towards issues of race and gender results in the theoretical erasure of Black women's experiences (Crenshaw, 1989).

Despite social inequalities in the blogosphere, the internet has been conceptualised as 'a third place for public discussions among black folk that were once limited to black-owned barbershops and beauty salons,' (Brock, 2009:17). This concept of the third space is based on a definition by Oldenburg (1991) that refers to neutral places focused around conversations that are inclusive, accessible, free of social hierarchies and offer possibilities for engagement based on shared interests. Such spaces also offer psychological comfort and spiritual support. According to Brock (2009) the internet embodies the third wave feminist mantra of 'the personal is political' in that political activity could be understood in terms of ideological struggles by individuals and groups. The blogosphere is also viewed as a space where women can explore race and gender from a black feminist perspective (Steele, 2011); as both a private and public space where women can escape the persistent patriarchal construction of the female space as private and male space as public (Saleh, 2010) and as a space to facilitate dialogue among feminists (Gaden, 2007).

Research on bloggers of African descent both within and outside the continent is sparse, and thus it is also rare to find studies on African women bloggers. However, understanding how groups (that are traditionally marginalised within mainstream media and society) engage with new communication technologies serves two important purposes. Firstly, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the blogosphere by revealing some of the complex, dynamic and innovative uses of the internet. Secondly, it helps to challenge traditional notions of what constitutes political thought and action by demonstrating alternative and discursive practices through the medium of blogs. Political intent is not a precursor to political action and therefore it is possible for bloggers to engage in discursive practices that are counterhegemonic yet not explicitly political (Kahn & Kellner 2004; Saleh, 2010; Steele, 2011), but radical in orientation. Such practices can also be construed as transformational both in terms of generating new levels of understanding and in facilitating self-empowerment.

Steele (2011) argues that African American women bloggers challenge dominant discourses through their blogs, which is a form of resistance against oppression. Black feminist epistemology serves as the central framework of her study which draws on Collins' (1990) conceptualisation of the matrix of domination, which refers to the interlocking and oppressive

systems of race, class and gender that black women experience in their everyday lives. Steele adapts these concepts to represent personal, communal and institutional dimensions. Her study demonstrates how African American women use gossip blogs as a discursive form of resistance in all three levels of her matrix of domination. Personal narratives are employed at the individual level to contest oppression; communal spaces within gossip blogs promote shared meanings; and discussions within blogs on experiences of racism across legal and social systems challenge oppression at the institutional level. The importance of Steele's study is in revealing the unconventional and innovative ways that African American women use blogs that constitutes politicised, discursive and counterhegemonic practice. Similarly, Boylorn (2013:77) demonstrates how Black women appropriate blogs as a platform for 'crunk feminism', a form of feminist resistance rooted in the experiences and perspectives of the hip hop generation. In her autoethnography she reveals her use of blogs 'to bring voice and visibility to marginalised populations, and to raise awareness about social injustices'.

On the continent of Africa where African women do not represent an ethnic minority group, different dynamics are at work in terms of social disadvantage; so that the potential benefits of ICTs in terms of education, social and economic empowerment are severely limited by poverty, illiteracy, language and a lack of computer proficiency (Somulu, 2007). For example, in the UK, 64% and 69% of black Caribbean and black African adults respectively have internet access at home (Ofcom, 2008). However, only 13.5% of Africa's population has any internet access at all (Internet World Stats, 2012). Many non-profit organisations are developing ICT projects as a means of facilitating gender equality among African women, which includes the use of blogs.

Before reviewing a study on women bloggers in Africa it is important to outline how African women on the continent experience both racial and gender inequalities. Neo-colonialism perpetuated through corporate globalization has a direct impact on gender inequality on the African continent. The link between corporate globalization, racism and gender-based discrimination has been acknowledged by the United Nations in terms of the impact of cheap migratory labour, sex trafficking, domestic servitude and sex tourism, as argued by Steady (2005:1) 'The overwhelming evidence seems to suggest that gender-based hierarchies and gender subordination combined with structural racism are being reinforced by globalization.' Understanding how ICTs and blogs in particular, can help to combat gender inequality in Africa is of major significance, both in terms of providing an aggregate picture of the blogosphere and in terms of identifying new ways to empower women. Although research in

this area is sparse, there is still evidence to show that where internet access is available, African women have embraced the blogosphere and are using blogs to promote women's equality and empowerment. A study by Somolu (2007) on women bloggers in Africa found that personalised blogs enable African women to engage actively in discussions, using their personal experiences as basis for commentary on issues affecting their lives.

Some of the frustrations they experienced and wrote about were clearly shared by many other women (for example, cultural expectations of women's roles in life, sexual harassment from men, pressure on women to look attractive, societal pressure on women to marry before the age of 30), (Somolu, 2007:481).

Blogging offers the opportunity for African women bloggers to express sentiments in a safe space with many admitting that they would not dare vocalise such views in public. The blogosphere offers anonymity and mutual support from other women bloggers and functions as medium for personalised, discursive, political engagement and self-empowerment through becoming 'active creators and disseminators of knowledge, writing about what is important to them' (Somolu, 2007:477). The vast majority of bloggers in the study were highly educated, white-collar professionals, who represent the urban elite of Africa and are not necessarily representative of African women in terms of their everyday experiences. However, this correlates with other studies in western countries that show most bloggers to be well-educated (Fox & Lenhart, 2006; Pedersen & Macafee, 2006; Pole, 2005).

Studies on African women bloggers are sparse, whether one looks to the vast continent of Africa or to African Diasporas in the western hemisphere, such as the US. There are as yet no academic studies on bloggers of African descent in the UK. The review of literature in this section demonstrates a pressing need to build on existing scholarship, both to show the diversified uses of blogs and to challenge the intense press and academic focus on political blogs defined in a narrow context which privileges white western men in the blogosphere. This section of the literature review demonstrates how this research project makes a valuable contribution to media, communication and cultural studies research through the examination of differential uses of blogs that are both unique and specific to African Caribbean bloggers in the UK, using theoretical and conceptual frameworks that uncover differential experiences based on race and gender.

## **2.4 Racist discourse and whiteness in the mainstream media**

This section serves as a critical analysis of the mainstream media in terms of its relationship with African Caribbean people in the UK. It focuses on how African Caribbean people are represented in mainstream discourse, which is important in terms of understanding their historical experience with the mainstream media and also provides an important context for understanding their motivations as bloggers.

A lack of newsroom diversity has often been cited as a contributory factor to the marginalisation and misrepresentation of ethnic minority groups across the mainstream media (Ainley, 1998; Cottle, 2000; Kretzschmer, 2007; Van Dijk, 2006). The most recent large scale survey of the industry conducted by the Journalism Training Forum (2002) revealed that just 4% of UK journalists are from an ethnic minority backgrounds. Several scholars have examined how media discourse reproduces racism including Law (2001) and Van Dijk (2006), amongst others. Racist discourse is a form of social practice linked to personal beliefs and attitudes, whereby beliefs about people from ethnic minority backgrounds can lead individuals to engage in racist behaviour or discriminatory practices (Van Dijk, 2006). The role of the media is key in this respect as the media reproduce negative stereotypes of ethnic minorities, which can influence perceptions about ethnic minority groups. This frequently involves focusing on social differences where ethnic minorities are presented as social problems (Parekh Report, 2000; Van Dijk, 2006), thus ‘both the meanings and the formal structures of text and talk in general and of news in particular, tend to favour the ingroup and often derogates or problematizes the outgroup’ (Van Dijk, 2000a:42). Van Dijk uses the term ‘ingroup’ to refer to the white majority population, whose status is dependent on there being an ‘outgroup’ of visible minorities which occupy the strata of racialised others.

The critical race theory approach and its focus on the collective and cumulative effects of racism as it operates on structural levels has been used to explain, through the concept of whiteness, how the media reproduce racism. Whiteness has been conceptualised as a multi-faceted social construct that functions to maintain white supremacy; (Owen, 2007) a system of unearned privileges (Kendal, 2006; Mc Intosh, 1988) and by the exclusion of others racialised as non-white (Gillborn, 2008). White supremacy has also been defined by as:

A political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white

subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (Frances Lee Ansley cited in Gillborn, 2008:36)

Although CRT is rooted in the historical experiences of African Americans and in legal studies, many European scholars are using this theoretical approach effectively to examine the experience of ethnic minority groups in Europe across a range of academic disciplines. The power of whiteness as it functions through the media is its invisibility (Gabriel, 1998), whereby what are essentially European values, beliefs, practices and traditions are universalised and presented as the defining principles that apply to all cultures (Fiske, 2000). Racist discourse is often presented through the media through news stories where ethnic minorities are deemed as social problems to society and occupy the realm of the racialised other (Van Dijk, 2000a). Despite this, racist discourse in the media is often obscured as negative stories about ethnic minorities which follow common themes such as immigration and racialised crime such as mugging, often appear at the same time that messages of social inclusion and anti-racism are disseminated in the news. Contextual analysis by Ian Law (2001) of news content in the British media between November 1996 and May 1997 revealed that ethnic minorities were constructed as social problems in 11% of items, compared with coverage of their contribution to society, which occurred in just 4.5% of items. Much wider coverage was given to *individual* contributions of ethnic minorities than the contributions of minorities as a *group*. The emphasis on individual achievement promotes the view that racism does not exist, since the individuals are held up as examples of success; whilst ethnic minority experiences of educational underachievement and unemployment is deemed to be self-induced and caused by a lack of ambition, lack of motivation and laziness. The same study found that a third of tabloid newspapers and a quarter of broadsheets carried negative stories about ethnic minorities. Whilst some newspapers appeared to carry anti-racist messages, this was deemed to be a strategy for:

masking continuing normative and progressive whiteness in news organisations, racial and ethnic inequalities of power and employment and a collective failure to provide appropriate quality news services for black and minority ethnic communities and consumers. (Van Dijk, 2000a:159)

Racism is also experienced by ethnic minorities through the media through the discourse of white middle class and elite social actors. Law (2001) argues that there is a tendency in the media to present racist comments by public figures as gaffes, rather than racism. For

example, *The Mirror* ran a front page story in August 1996 with the headline *Total Eclipse of the Loon*, about Prince Philip's comments inferring that Indian people lack technical skills. The Prince, after examining a fusebox, said: 'It looks as though it was put in by an Indian' (Kerr, 1999, para. 2). Despite the reference to indignation on the part of anti-racist campaigners in the very short news story of less than 90 words, the Prince's behaviour is described as 'bungling' rather than racist. Linguistic anthropologist Jane Hill (2008) conceptualizes racist discourse as linguistic ideologies, which refer to ideas about language that are shaped by political and economic interests which often promote the production and circulation of stereotypes. An example of this is ideological multiplicity, which involves overt racist discourse disguised as harmless banter or light talk, and is an important arena for whites to use explicit racist language whilst claiming the offensive remark was not meant to be taken seriously. For example, *The Telegraph* ran a news story in January 2009 with the headline *Prince Harry Paki Row: MOD Launches Formal Enquiry over Video Gaffe* (Bingham & Leach 2009). The report referred to video footage in which Prince Harry refers to a Pakistani officer cadet as a 'Paki' and also referred to Muslim insurgents as 'ragheads'. The inference that the Prince should be forgiven for the 'gaffe' was given weight by the inclusion of comments by David Cameron, who at that time was leader of the Conservative Party. Although he acknowledged that the word Paki is unacceptable, he ruled out any punishment for the Prince, saying it was unnecessary. This view that racist abuse is not serious enough to warrant punishment was further reinforced by the comments of a former Conservative foreign office minister, Rod Richards, who said that the remarks were neither racist nor derogatory and that people were 'making an issue out of something that is not an issue' (Bingham & Leach 2009, para. 19). Hill's theoretical and conceptual approach of linguistic ideologies helps to expose through analysing racist discourse, the power that whites have both to engage in racist discourse and to defend their racism through the media. Therefore it is essential to expose whiteness in order to effectively analyse racism in the media.

Studies that focus on the perceptions of ethnic minorities in terms of how they are represented in the media have tended to focus on the medium of television and offer useful insights into how minority groups identify and perceive racist representations of themselves. BBCTV's Equal Opportunities department commissioned one such study in 1995. African Caribbean viewers complained that black characters portrayed in *Eastenders* lacked cultural authenticity and the homes they lived in reflected white British culture. They also complained



that black characters were rarely depicted as professionals and were critical of police dramas like *The Bill*, where black characters were mostly depicted as criminals. They also criticised what they perceived as a tendency for black male characters to be partnered with a white female or an African Caribbean woman with very light skin. This was seen as a deliberate strategy to dilute the blackness of African Caribbean people. However, they also believed that this was due in part to a lack of knowledge on the part of white programme makers about black culture and their agenda of making programmes for predominantly white audiences who they perceive to be more comfortable with mixed couples on their television screens. Viewers in the study felt that multiculturalism symbolised the homogenisation of ethnic minority cultures into a mass of meaningless stereotypes, because these representations were constructed in the white imagination and not borne of reality (Cottle, 2000).

This section demonstrates how dominant discourses on race reproduced in the mainstream media frequently frame African Caribbeans and ethnic minorities generally as social problems, treating cultural differences as deficiencies and perpetuating negative stereotypes. This provides an important socio-political context for this study in relation to its aim to explore how blogs are used to address issues of representation, largely enacted through dominant discourses. The use of blogs as discursive and counterhegemonic practice will be explored in this study, contributing to a small but developing area of blog research that employs a broader interpretation of political thought and action and which does not exclude personalised blogs from analysis.

## **2.5 Democratization of the media and democracy through the media**

The problems identified in section 2:4 pertaining to issues of the representation of ethnic minority groups within in the mainstream media, can be seen as part of wider issues sometimes articulated in terms of an undemocratic media (Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Hadl, 2004; MacBride, 2004; McChesney, 1998, 1999, Traber, 1995). The MacBride Report (2004:185) commissioned by UNESCO argues that barriers to communication and participation in the media interfere with the 'Right to Communicate' described as 'a continuing advance towards liberty and democracy'. Such barriers have occurred as a result of the consolidation of media industries which has resulted in large conglomerates dominating the news media and the commodification of news to the point where such an intense focus on profits have diminished the social aspects of the media (MacBride, 2004; McChesney 1998, 1999). Left to market forces, the communication rights of the individual

take secondary place to the rights of news institutions (MacBride, 2004) and the mainstream media largely focuses on the interests of the elite, as opposed to ordinary members of the public (Traber, 1995). The commercialisation of the news media has signalled a shift in the role of the news industry from the watchdog function, with its key purpose to inform members of society on matters of public interest, to a market-focused environment where the public are viewed purely as consumers that can deliver huge profits for the oligarchs of the news industry (McChesney 1998, 1999).

The link between the media and democracy can be defined both in terms of the media as an essential sphere for supporting democracy (democracy *through* the media) and in terms of the need for a democratic media (democratization *of* the media). The MacBride Report (2004: 166) defines democratization of the media as:

the process whereby a) the individual becomes an active partner and not a mere object of communication b) the variety of messages exchanged increases and c) the extent and quality of social representation or participation in communication are augmented.

The MacBride Report (2004) argues that a democratic system of communication requires diversity and choice in content, since within democratic societies individuals should be able to make informed choices based on a broad range of information and opinions, but these ideals are undermined by concentrations of government and corporate power within the media. This view is echoed by McChesney (1998, 1999) who links power structures and media ownership with media content, echoing Chomsky & Herman's (1995) study *Manufacturing Consent*, which demonstrates how in democratic societies, the media present a distorted view of the world that promotes government interests and the interests of the powerful and elite members of society by filtering out opposing views to preserve the status quo. McChesney (1998) later argued that the ownership of the key media markets such as film, television, newspapers, magazines, books and cable television, lie in the hands of a few and there are severe barriers, mostly economic, to new entrants. Such large concentrations of power allow media conglomerates to focus on producing content that reaps the largest profits and greater profits are gained through increased commercialism which results in more advertising and less content. But a commercialised news media has a tendency to reflect mainstream opinion which can lead to the marginalisation of minority groups (MacBride, 2004; McChesney, 1999). Therefore having access to social media and the internet provides

an opportunity to empower media consumers who can move from passively receiving content to proactively filtering and producing content. By contrast, Traber's (1995) normative theory of the news media draws on a humanistic conceptualization of the individual as having an equal right to value and dignity and to participate in the public realm, echoing the MacBride Report's (2004) assertion of the Right to Communicate and placing communication at the centre of a democratic society.

Several critics who have articulated the threat to democracy by flawed media systems and who view a democratized media as a moral necessity have also advanced ideas on how to address these problems through the democratization of the media. The Internet has been hailed as a democratizing medium that can potentially address issues of representation and participation. Enzensberger (1976) was one of the first scholars to highlight the emancipatory potential of the new media in that era (electronic media such as television, computers, videotapes, etc.) which lay in placing the tools of media production into the hands of the masses. Although he referred to his ideas as 'social media theory' they were later described as democratization of the media; the potential of new media 'in helping to decentralize, mobilize, interconnect and free the individual from bureaucratic control'. (McQuail, 1994:89) He argued that a significant benefit of new media is in replacing the one to many mode of communication with a many to many mode—from a large scale one-directional flow of information to the masses to a more participatory environment. Although critical of the failure of Marxists to recognise the revolutionary potential of new media, Enzensberger still argued from a socialist perspective that the media limit the masses to receiving information, whilst the elites who own or have access to the tools of media production are the ones transmitting information. He proposed a model for democratization of the media which involved: emancipatory use of the media, decentralisation and mobilisation of the masses, interactive media that allows the public to reply and give feedback, political awareness and participation and collectively owned and collectively produced media. The MacBride Report (2004) building on the ideas of Enzensberger, identified four key approaches to breaking down barriers to democratization which involved: broader popular access to the media through feedback and asserting the right to reply, participation of amateurs in producing broadcasting programmes, development of alternative channels of communication, participatory and community media and self-management and involvement in decision-making processes.

Carroll & Hackett (2006) argue that the commodification of news and dependency on advertising revenue has a direct impact on the representation of different groups in society, because diversity is only permissible in as much as it is profitable. Ethnic minority groups are often considered too small to be profitable, resulting in the domination of white opinion and interests since this is where the largest markets are found and the greater profits made (Cottle, 2000). Whilst Carroll and Hackett (2006) acknowledge that democracy should be regarded as a contested ideology, they argue that the media is a key area for struggle and intervention from social movements, which can be effective in the battle for media democracy. They assert that the emancipatory potential of new media should not be too readily dismissed, since the internet creates new channels for media activism beyond establishing alternative media structures and creating alternative media content. However, alternative media structures and alternative content can sometimes function as oppositional media and create a wave of activism towards specific issues. Blogs can bypass gatekeepers to allow users to engage in direct communication with audiences.

Democracy is often regarded as an idealised concept defined as facilitating the plurality of viewpoints through the public sphere. But according to Mouffe (1999) democracy is about contesting differing viewpoints through a process of conflict in what she terms an 'agonistic' public space. For Mouffe (quoted in Carpentier & Cammaerts 2006), new media limits what she sees as the essential process of agonism, because the organisation of social spaces on the web and the ability to select information based on user interests means that individuals have a tendency to filter out what they do not like, thereby avoiding the agonism necessary for what has been termed 'radical pluralist democracy' (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006). Mouffe's concept of agonism refers to democracy *through* the media. However, she overlooks the potential for agonism through alternative online spaces such as the blogosphere, and fails to acknowledge that people who both consume and produce media content have bypassed the oligarchs of the corporate news media to create a self-regulating environment and a 'new political culture' that 'encompasses bracing debate about everything that people disagree about' (Jacob Weisberg quoted in Kurtz, 2005). The internet has enabled the emergence of a discursive space where counterhegemonic discourse takes place (Grimes & Warf, 1997) and where the blogosphere has enabled the articulation of 'new counterhegemonic vision[s] of black identity' (Brock, 2009:32). The idea of cyberspace as a discursive space has also been articulated by Mitra & Watts (2002) who conceptualize it as a medium through which 'voices' are heard. Their definition of voice refers to 'a contested commodity where the

speaker must be able to find a space (discursive and physical) where the (agency) of the speaker can be concretized in the process of speaking,' (Mitra & Watts, 2002:483). The significance of this perspective is in the articulation of cyberspace as a medium for discursive practice and where traditionally marginalised groups have developed strategies of voicing and have therefore begun to experience discursive power on the internet.

The agonistic conception of democracy as articulated by Mouffe (1999) has influenced much debate about deliberative versus agonistic notions of democracy and the role of the public sphere, which is of major significance in the age of the internet. Mouffe (1999) argues that the dominant, deliberative conception of democracy views the Habermasian model of the public sphere, as a space where politics are discussed through a process of rationality and reason. According to Mouffe (1999:754) within the deliberative democracy concept, politics refers to 'the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order.' But the agonistic pluralist conception of democracy defines *political* as 'the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society that can take many different forms' (Mouffe 1999:754). Building on the deliberative conception of democracy, Dahlberg (2007:827) articulates the idea of the public sphere as 'a space constituted through discursive contestation'. He argues that the Habermasian concept of the public sphere is problematic for two key reasons. Firstly, because the fragmented structure of the internet, whilst facilitating participation has led to the formation of consensual groups whose interaction is based on the reinforcement of existing views rather than debating, discussing and critiquing ideas through which public opinion is formed. This is not consistent with Habermas's conception of the public sphere. The second issue of contention relates to the limitations of the deliberative model of democracy and its failure to acknowledge unequal relations of power within the public sphere. According to Dahlberg (2007) power relations within the deliberative process can be better understood by employing post-Marxist discourse theory. Discourse here is defined as social systems of meaning used to identify subjects and objects through which individuals make sense of the world. Discourse exists in terms of inclusion/exclusion, which is marked by discursive boundaries. This structure is characterised by an on-going antagonistic struggle to establish hegemony, defined as 'the taken for granted social order' (Dahlberg, 2007:835). This on-going struggle results in dominant discourses that become authoritative and subordinate discourses that are suppressed and become insignificant. Furthermore, dominant discourses are associated with dominant identities that are privileged and have a higher status and social position relative to marginalised identities within this

socially constructed hierarchy. In this regard the public sphere is better defined as a space that involves both inter-discursive and intra-discursive contestation where consensus and hegemony are constantly challenged. Dahlberg's (2007) proposed theory provides direction for further exploration into how fragmented groups on the internet contribute to a radical public sphere by contesting dominant discourses through discursive practices. In her study of Australian feminist bloggers, Shaw (2011) employs the concept of deliberative democracy in her articulation of 'discursive activism' which she defines as text or talk that 'intervenes in hegemonic discourses and that works at the level of language to change political cultures' (para. 1). Shaw argues that direct activism was not always the intention of the feminist blogging community she studied, but the blogosphere offered a space to intervene in mainstream discourses within the media and within academia.

New approaches for understanding political discourse and activism in online spaces such as the idea of a radicalised public sphere, are applicable to a wide variety of counterhegemonic discursive projects. Breindl (2010) for example, argues that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, citizen engagement is directed more towards issues that affect the everyday lives of individuals and less influenced by formal political processes or dominant ideologies. This shift can be attributed to the growth of the internet and expansion of ICTs in the 1990s. Web 2.0 offers new possibilities for individualised protest activities based on user generated content. Individuals can be seen as engaging in political thought and action through the pursuit of personal interests and lifestyle choices rather than through traditional political structures. However, this shift towards individualisation is shaping how political practices evolve. Focusing on individual and personalised political activity through blogs, contributes to a broader understanding of how the internet is used for protest activities. Dahlberg's (2007) employment of discourse theory to explain the discursive process within an agonistic conception of democracy can be developed as a framework for exploring the discursive orientation of blogs. Gee (2005:2) argues that all language is always political, in his definition of political as 'how social goods are thought about, argued over, and distributed in society'. Social goods are defined as 'anything that a group of people believes to be a source of power, status, value, or worth' Gee (2005:2). This extends the concept of the political beyond the confinement of party politics. Language is political because any individual's use of grammar is based on their view of the world. This conception of all language as political and of discourses as being constituted of socially situated identities and activities that are fluid and exist in terms of complicity and contestation, provides a useful framework for

understanding the use of personalised blogs as discursive political practice enacted through language in ways that contest dominant discourses and can therefore be construed as counterhegemonic.

Robinson's (2011) theory on how dominant discourses across race, gender and other identities are intersecting, offers an important context for the activities of African Caribbean bloggers at the centre of this research project. This theory is based on the principle that all individuals have multiple identities that may include race, gender, class, sexual orientation and ability/disability, that are socially constructed through discourses. Dominant discourses operate within a hierarchy and frame social relations between individuals in terms of power. Individuals are 'positioned' by discourses as a result of membership of a particular group (e.g. white, female, middle class). Discourses relate both to how people act in the world and how they engage with it – as a consequence of their positioning within a structured hierarchy of identities. Constructed meanings about race, gender and class derived through dominant discourses can obstruct one's ability to see an individual as a 'whole' person, even though all individuals have multiple and layered identities irrespective of their race, class or gender. There is therefore a need to transcend dominant discourses to counter racism and sexism in society. Robinson argues that dominant discourses across race, gender and other identities are intersecting because of the tendency to evaluate individuals in terms of their closeness to the white, male, middle class, Christian, heterosexual, English speaking youth, who is the idealised norm against which everyone else is measured. The problem is that such socially constructed identities are perceived as realities, and are perceived to be the desired norm for everyone. Such perceptions can lead to the devaluation of difference and ethnocentrism. Another reason Robinson advances for the intersection of dominant discourses on race, gender and other identities, is because when a facet of identity is not deemed as normative, it becomes the dominant element of a person's identity, overshadowing other important elements of identity. For example, an African Caribbean woman in Britain is generally perceived first in terms of her race because African Caribbeans are a minority group and white European ethnicity is deemed normative. In Robinson's Model on Discourses, white is more valued than being non-white, male is more valued than female, being heterosexual is seen as morally superior to being non-heterosexual, being able-bodied is more desirable than being disabled and being middle class is more desirable than being working class or poor. This model highlights how identities are structured within a hierarchical system and how those who deviate from normative identities are devalued. Dominant discourses help to

preserve this socially constructed status quo. According to Robinson, power ‘comes through unravelling for oneself, the multiple meanings of identities, their relationship to other identities, and to other people’ (2011:78). Robinson’s theory provides a useful framework for understanding the oppressive nature of dominant discourses on race and other identities which can help explain motivations for their contestation through discursive practices such as blogging that is both political and counterhegemonic.

This chapter has explored alternative media as a theoretical framework for critical studies on blogging, demonstrating through existing studies that many elements of alternative media theory are embedded within the practice of blogging. It has reviewed existing literature on blogs, exposing gaps in scholarship on blog use by ethnic minority groups; the need for further studies exploring the use of personalised blogs as alternative forms of online political participation and further exploration of the impact of race and gender in the blogosphere. This chapter has also offered a critical examination of the mainstream media, focusing in particular on issues of representation relating to African Caribbean communities; using critical race theory/whiteness as a framework for exploring how racist discourse is perpetuated through the mainstream media. It has examined how some scholars have conceptualised and approached these problems through theories of a democratised media and the potential for increased participation by traditionally marginalised groups, offering the potential for self-representation. This chapter has also explored challenges to the deliberative theory of democracy through new conceptions of agonistic democracy and discourse theory that have paved the way for further explorations into discursive political practices on the internet such as blogging, which can be construed as counterhegemonic projects. The review of literature in this chapter helps to place this study within a historical, socio-political context, and also demonstrates that the unexplored areas of research that will be covered in this study will both complement and build on existing research to offer a more nuanced understanding of the blogosphere. The next chapter offers a critical examination of the blogosphere as a medium for collective advocacy and collective activism and is important in terms of contextualising the social, cultural, economic and political environment in which the activities of the participants take place.



### **Chapter 3: The blogosphere, collective advocacy & collective activism**

The aim of this chapter is to examine counterhegemonic practice and discursive activism in the blogosphere within a wider social context by exploring the specific ways in which the blogosphere and the internet in general, both facilitate and limit collective advocacy. This is a relevant area of inquiry given that this study is positioned within the theoretical framework of alternative media characterised by non-mainstream, radical and participatory elements. Blogs hold the potential to promote collective advocacy as an incremental step towards social change. This chapter therefore offers a critical examination of the blogosphere that serves the purpose of contextualising the social, cultural, economic and political context in which the activities of the participants of this study are situated. It has been approached through the examination of three distinct areas: the blogosphere and the public sphere, corporate and elite hegemonies in cyberspace and collective advocacy and collective activism in the blogosphere.

#### **3.1 The blogosphere and the public sphere**

The blogosphere is part of the wider culture of the internet and has been conceptualised both as an alternative public sphere (Moyo, 2007, 2011) and as a component of multiple spheres (Kellner, 2000). The Habermasian concept of the public sphere refers to ‘a discursive arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement and action’ (Vila, 1992 cited in Cammaerts, 2008: 358). Habermas (1964, 1991) defines the public sphere as a realm of social life through which public opinion is formed through the process of individuals expressing, vocalising and publishing their opinions on matters of public interest in an open forum that is neither hindered nor restricted by bureaucracy. The public sphere is based on the principles of rationality and common sense and mediates between societal and state interests. Whether the blogosphere or the internet in general, can be regarded as representative of the public sphere has been the subject of much debate. It has been argued that blogs politicize private issues (Coleman, 2005) leading to a fragmented public sphere that is characterised by ‘intimacy and authenticity’ rather than ‘the rational and common good’ (Cammaerts, 2008: 359). This is part of a wider societal shift away from institutionalised politics towards discursive political practices and personalised political activity shaped by everyday experiences (Breindl, 2010; Coleman, 2005). The public sphere refers to a space where rational debate occurs until consensus is reached. However, the individual orientation of blogs limits their capacity to foster rational debate. Blogs tend to focus on stories already in the mainstream rather than

advancing fresh information and as a consequence contribute to the extension of dominant themes in the mainstream media. The privileging of mainstream topics has an adverse impact on local issues excluding them from rational debate. Furthermore, the number of discourses occurring in the blogosphere across millions of blogs and the time involved in locating and contributing to discussions is likely to dissuade participation (Baoill, 2004). Fragmentation in the blogosphere manifests through the formation of niche groups and the tendency for blogs to present singular perspectives hinders the potential for sustained discussions (Papacharissi, 2002b). Rational debate in the blogosphere is also impeded by racism. A study by Pole (2005) reveals the common practice of white bloggers bombarding black bloggers writing on race issues with negative comments clearly driven by racial prejudice, rather than rationality and common sense. Blogs have also been associated with other irrational behaviours known as ‘flaming’ that include hostilities, insults and other forms of bigotry (Papacharissi, 2002b). Despite the limitations of the blogosphere as a medium for rational debate, it has been argued that one of the main functions of blogs is in developing subjectivity, enabling individuals to develop the necessary subjective skills to engage in rational debate that may occur outside the blogosphere within online bulletin boards or other virtual spaces (Barton, 2005). Mouffe (cited in Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006) argues that social spaces on the internet orient users to select information based on personal interests and to filter out what they do not like. This leads to the formation of consensual groups whose interaction is based on the reinforcement of existing views (Dahlberg 2007). This is due in part to the sheer scale of the blogosphere that induces people to navigate to blogs that reflect their own values and beliefs, rather than towards content that challenges their pre-conceived ideas (Cammaerts, 2008). The likelihood of people with radically differing views from different cultural backgrounds engaging via the internet is very remote (Warf & Grimes, 1997:267):

Via the net we often contact faraway people who are socio-economically similar to us, while we frequently ignore nearby persons of different ethnicities or social classes who experience the world very differently.

The process of internet users constantly engaging with content that reflects their views serves to reinforce their perception of social reality as constituting public opinion (Coleman, 2005). In her critique of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, Mouffe (1999:756) argues that agonism is an essential component of radical, pluralist democracy. Her reconceptualization of the public sphere defines it as an agonistic space involving adversarial discourses through which ‘conflictual consensus’ is reached. This is in sharp contrast to the Habermasian

concept of deliberative democracy in which the public sphere is characterised by rationality and reason. It is possible to distinguish between two types of democratic discourse: homogenous and 'truly public'. The former involves interaction between like-minded individuals that serves to reinforce existing views, whilst the latter involves conversations between individuals with opposing views where 'tempers may flare' but 'norms of reasonableness are often invoked' (Schudson, 1997: 302). Drawing on the conversational model of democracy, Wyatt et al (2000) argue that ordinary political discourses on everyday issues can sometimes include 'informal deliberation' and further that discourses between like-minded individuals is of greater significance within democratic processes than has previously been recognised. This is based on earlier studies (Wyatt et al, 1991 cited in Wyatt et al, 2001) which reveals that individuals are more likely to speak freely in their own homes or the homes of close associates. Formal institutions such as the workplace or civic organisations prompt fears of offending others or of reprisals, therefore 'ordinary political conversation rests close to the soul of democracy' (Wyatt et al, 2001:89).

Equal access and participation are central to the Habermasian concept of the public sphere (Baoill, 2004; Lee, 2006). However, whilst blogs offer the potential for participation, complex issues of access exist at multiple levels in terms of digital skills and experience, computer equipment and broadband access and opportunities for usage (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003). Studies have also found evidence of race and class-based digital divides (Hoffman et al, 2001). Bloggers are more likely to be highly educated (Technorati, 2011) but whilst African Americans are less likely to have internet access they are more likely than whites to blog and more likely to be content producers than content consumers (Schradie, 2012). The blogosphere also falls short of the Habermasian ideal of equal status in the public sphere since it is dominated by elites, including academics, journalists and A-list bloggers facilitated by ranking technologies (Baoill, 2004; Cammaerts, 2008; Lee, 2006). A-list blogs are predominantly authored by educated white males, leading to the marginalisation of interests within the blogosphere on the basis of race, class and gender. Although the blogosphere does not meet the Habermasian concept of a public sphere, it is regarded as an important online forum for participation (Huang, 2009; Lee, 2006; Papacharissi, 2002b). Critics argue that the Habermasian concept of the bourgeois public sphere represents an ideal, rather than a reality since it was restricted to property owners and was therefore dominated by white males to the exclusion of women and the working classes (Kellner, 2000; Lee, 2006, Papacharissi, 2002b). Schudson (1997) argues that democratic discourse as theorised by Habermas is not premised

on equality, since individuals must possess ‘cultural capital’ in order to participate in any meaningful way.

It is clear that the blogosphere does not fit the Habermasian concept of the public sphere and poses limitations for reaching consensus through rational debate, a precursor for collective advocacy. However, as has been argued, the public sphere as theorised by Habermas is an idealised concept fraught with contradictions and despite the focus on equal access and participation in reality has historically been exclusionary, providing access to and serving the interests of white, property-owning men. It is ironic that despite technological advances that have brought the introduction of the internet facilitating participation within cyberspace, that white males still dominate this domain. This has been attributed to the reality that unequal power relations and hegemonies are reproduced along with new opportunities created through technological advances (Cammaerts, 2008). Whilst ongoing hegemonic struggles represent a permanent feature of cultural life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Cammaerts, 2008) they also herald new opportunities for previously marginalised groups. This is most significantly reflected in US studies which show a shift from consumption to production among African American communities, who are more likely to blog than whites. But it remains doubtful as to whether their blogs reach the mainstream or even the black working class, given the intersection of race and class and the persistence of a class-based digital divide (Schradié, 2012). UK data (OFCOM, 2008) shows a similar pattern of low consumption versus higher production among African Caribbean communities. The percentage of the black population that reads news online stands at 13% (Black Caribbean) and 11% (Black African) compared with 24% for the UK population as a whole. However, the percentage of the black population involved in creativity (using social networking sites and/or maintaining a website or blog) stands at 23% (Black Caribbean) 24% (Black African) compared with 22% for the UK population as a whole. Whilst it is not possible to determine what proportion of the percentages account for blogging, this still represents a preference for consumption. Internet take-up among the black population is also higher than the UK population as a whole: Black Caribbean (64%) Black African (69%) UK population (62%). These figures demonstrate the viability of blogs as a medium for collective advocacy as a foundation for social change among African Caribbean communities. However, further research is necessary to explore the reasons underlying the gap between consumption and production. It has been suggested that marginalisation within the mainstream media and the availability of independent publishing platforms has increased the propensity for content production (Schradié, 2012).

### 3.2 Corporate and elite hegemonies in cyberspace

The previous section points to the internet as a contradictory space, reproducing inequalities that exist within the idealised concept of the public sphere on the basis of class, gender and race from which a more accurate conceptualisation of multiple spheres has emerged (Kellner, 2000). Although counterhegemonic practice occurs within virtual spaces such as the blogosphere; 'market forces have established themselves as the hegemonic power of the medium' (Cammaerts, 2008:363) and blogs are both implicated and embedded in capitalism (Kellner, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002b). Critical perspectives of the blogosphere and internet, suggest that they have been colonised by capitalist market forces (Cammaerts, 2008). Participatory mediums such as the blogosphere help to maintain corporate media power as well as to challenge it, since increased participation cannot by itself challenge the power of media conglomerates nor drown out the dominant discourses in the corporate news media (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2010). This is due in part to the disturbing reality that the internet and the blogosphere exist within a market-driven, profit-oriented infrastructure owned and controlled by media conglomerates (Deuze, 2008) that provide 'free' access to the very tools and technologies necessary to participate in cyberspace. It is therefore impossible to engage in counterhegemonic practice or internet activism independent of their global hegemonic power, implicating all internet users as unwitting colluders in global systems of domination. This has serious implications for counterhegemonic practice, especially involving marginalised groups since media oligarchs' conception of diversity and pluralism is based on consumer choice and competition rather than increasing the number of diverse voices in the media (Dwyer & Martin, 2010).

Studies reveal that over-reliance on search engines and news aggregator sites limits content diversity by restricting choice (Dwyer & Martin, 2010) and as a consequence, representational power on the internet lies in the hands of a few companies (Patelis, 2013). Cleland (2009) argues that Google has acquired unprecedented global media power not through ownership but by gaining and maintaining control over the digital uses of information to make it widely accessible such as storing information, making it searchable and providing usage and monetization data. Its business model is premised on the acquisition of information that is free to Google which it sells to advertisers seeking access to its vast audiences while undermining the economic potential of information producers. Search engines are the 'gatekeepers of cyberspace' and Google 'overwhelmingly dominates the industry' limiting selective choices by including some and not others (Diaz, 2008: 11).

Internet users are dependent on search engines to navigate the vast amounts of information stored on the web and content producers are reliant on search engines to direct new audiences to their sites. Search engines therefore play a vital role in helping people observe the world we live in. Yet the process by which blogs and websites appear in search pages are based on Google's page rank system which privileges those with the largest number of inbound links. Therefore the sites that are already popular become more popular and continue to dominate the web. This has a major impact on how we view the world (Couldry, 2012). Google's dominance of the web has more devastating consequences for the very groups seeking social and cultural equity on the web. Noble (2012) argues that purportedly neutral technologies often perpetuate dominant narratives that reinforce negative representations of raced and gendered identities on the web. Search engines in particular are a discursive manifestation of hegemonic media power. The results of a Google search on the keywords 'black girls' in 2010 was denounced as 'symbolic, harmful and familiar misrepresentations derived from traditional mass media and popular culture' (Noble, 2012: intro). Noble's research reveals how terms like 'black booty on the beach' and 'sugary black pussy' were the first words to appear in the results, functioning as the primary representation of black girls and women on the internet. She argues that the association of black girls and women with pornography represents the values of Google's commercial partners and advertisers and demonstrates the appropriation of black identity for commercial profit. Its search engine technology based on algorithms is also charged with bias towards political, cultural and economic elites in the US.

Inducements by corporate entities and conglomerates serve to undermine counterhegemonic practice through the use of 'clogs' (corporate blogs) that are part of the PR strategy of these organisations and 'flogs' (fake blogs) maintained by bloggers who are financed by corporate sponsors (Deuze, 2008). A-list bloggers have been co-opted by politicians and recruited to write blogs on their campaign trails and sometimes paid large sums of money to act as 'consultants' leading to questions about the credibility and independence of some bloggers. The blogosphere has also been appropriated by political and cultural elites who use it as a medium for self-promotion and propaganda supported by mainstream journalists who routinely re-publish extracts, leading to increased publicity and wide dissemination. Such examples demonstrate how 'blogs have been fully adopted as a cunning political marketing and propaganda instrument in the hands of political elites' (Cammaerts, 2008: 367). Research reveals bloggers can command social power in the blogosphere on the basis of their capacity

to influence audiences. The greater the number of inbound links to a blog the higher the level of traffic it will receive and consequently the more influence it will have on the web. Political bloggers attain more social power than personal bloggers among specific audiences although the social power of bloggers is also linked to personal characteristics, celebrity status and web design features. The social power that women attain in the blogosphere is significantly weaker than men, despite the fact that they also produce political knowledge. Bloggers with a higher socio-economic status produce more political knowledge and attain more social power than those from lower socio-economic groups. This points to 'a persisting intellectual and patriarchal hegemony' that exists in the blogosphere linked to the unequal distribution of power offline (Wei, 2009). These findings are consistent with later studies. Hindman (2008: 270) argues that 'public discourse online looks more like a multilevel marketing scheme than a Habermasian ideal'. His research reveals that the dominant voices online are less representative of society and more elite than voices carried in the mainstream media. His study compared 30 columnists writing for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Los Angeles Times* with 30 top bloggers over the same time period. The findings reveal that the bloggers were more likely to have attended a top university and 75% of them held a doctorate compared with 25% of the columnists. There was also a greater representation of women and ethnic minorities among the columnists. Hindman (2008: 286) cites this as proof that the blogosphere promotes discursive elitism and empowers 'white, male bloggers with Ivy League degrees'.

This section highlights the paradox of the internet and blogosphere as virtual spaces which serve as useful platforms for counterhegemonic practice and facilitate participation by traditionally marginalised groups whilst being simultaneously owned and controlled by corporate hegemonies that provide free services on which users have come to depend. While they are an invaluable resource, search engines offer a skewed version of reality, privileging economic, political and cultural elites. More troubling is the manner in which Google's search engine has been shown to reproduce raced and gendered stereotypes and harmful representations of black women and girls. On a positive note, following Noble's study (2012) an article she wrote lamenting the perpetuation of racist and sexist discourse through Google's search engine resulted in modifications to its algorithms which has produced a significant improvement. A Google search on 'black girls' on 20 December 2013 elicited no results linked to pornography in the first 18 pages. However, on page 19, out of 10 results 5 were explicit porn sites. Page 20 and 21, as far as the search went, brought up no further links

to pornography. The improvement highlights the power of critical research and demonstrates that reform is possible. But a problematic issue relating to search engine bias is the fact that virtually all of the results were linked to sites in the US, highlighting the geographical imbalance and ‘hidden structural forces’ at work (Couldry, 2012). The domination of the blogosphere by highly educated white males demonstrates the uphill struggle by women and people of colour who make up global majority populations, to reach wide audiences and attain the same level of social power. If collective advocacy and counterhegemonic practice is to be undertaken effectively as an incremental step towards social change, then more effective strategies must be developed to counter white patriarchal hegemony in the blogosphere.

### **3.3 Collective advocacy and collective activism in the blogosphere**

Collective advocacy is a process where ‘people in similar situations come together—with or without external support—to make common cause, draw strength from each other and get their collective voices heard’ (Scottish Executive 2000, cited in Scottish Human Services Trust, 2003:14). However, it has been argued that we are living in the age of individualism and that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is defined by a failure of collective decision-making about pressing issues. According to Gilbert (2013) whilst multiple causes exist, neoliberalism is the dominant factor because of the assumptions it enforces of ‘the isolated, competitive individual as the basic unit of human experience’ resulting in the impotence of collective agency (preface). Neoliberalism has led to the rise of the commercial elite by promoting individualism as the social norm alongside a competitive, market-driven ideology. The concept of meritocracy is entrenched within a capitalist infrastructure that encourages ruthless competition between individual citizens to achieve personal success, measured in materialistic terms. This is defined as ‘competitive individualism’. At the root of the concept of individualism lies the belief that individual identity is not produced through social interactions and relations, but rather that ‘social relations are things that happen to individuals’ (Gilbert, 2013:32). Subjectivity is defined by a division between public and private, the latter being inaccessible to others and perceived as the authentic self. This has damaging implications for collective agency since the private, individual self determines the capacity to act in the world and this includes decision-making. It also engenders the privileging of individual decision-making over collective deliberation and the notion of the private domain, consisting of creativity and rationality as private property that needs to be protected at all costs.



(Bennett & Segerberg, 2011) argue that individualism has increased in western societies at a time when attendance at churches and similar institutions that traditionally formed the basis for collective consciousness has declined. Individualism manifests through engagement with causes at the individual level focused largely on lifestyle issues. This results in individual rather than collective actions and the personalisation of societal issues. Under these circumstances individuals are less likely to join social movements and only participate in selected actions. Personalised political activity takes place on various levels. While some causes involve independent and autonomous activities, other issues involve greater levels of engagement and interaction. Efforts can be focused around a single issue or dispersed across multiple issues. But there is growing concern that personalised communication undermines the effectiveness of collective advocacy and collective action. A collective identity is a key component of collective advocacy and the long term commitment and focus needed to bring about social change is unlikely to be found within casual, individualised networks. However, studies have found that despite the individual orientation of blogs, it is possible for bloggers to develop a collective identity through 'shared consciousness, distinct blogging practices and a common adversary' (Ting, 2010:231). 'Collective individualism' refers to the possibility of maintaining individuality in terms of attachment to specific causes and blogging styles whilst experiencing a sense of collective consciousness. This is facilitated through social networks which play a vital role in enabling interactions and alliances among like-minded individuals united by common causes and motivated to initiate social change. Ting's study identified three types of political bloggers: non-activists, online activists and offline activists, who were united by a common interest in social and political issues in Singapore. Blogs, social media and other ICTs were utilised to circulate information on causes, publicize campaigns, develop alliances with other activists and undertake virtual activism through social networking sites. Formal and informal ties are seen as crucial in building trust and developing relationships that provide solidarity and support. The findings demonstrate the importance of collective identity and social networks in encouraging and promoting participation and collective action. Bennett & Segerberg's (2011) own research found that personalised communication strategies can help to build strong protest networks and there does seem to be a benefit in offering an inclusive agenda that allows for individual and personalised participation that can be coordinated through digital media to bring about coherent collective action. Obar et al (2012) argue that the ultimate goal of collective advocacy is collective action, which can take many forms but is centred on political mobilisation, for the purpose of effecting social change. Their study involving more than 50 advocacy organisations in the US reveals a

strong perception by participants that social media tools including blogs, can help promote civic engagement and social action. The main benefits are in strengthening outreach by harnessing the interactive nature of social media to engage in two-way conversations on issues of importance. The speed of communication is also cited as beneficial in enabling participation in a variety of collective actions including debates, petition-signing and other events. The authors note that whilst further research is necessary, their findings counter arguments that social media generates weak ties that are ineffective in achieving political and ideological social change.

Surman and Reilly (2003) advance four major areas through which the internet is being used to facilitate activism strategically, creatively and politically: collaboration, publishing, mobilisation and observation. Mobilisation, which refers to online mobilisation and activism, has led to the development of ‘hub and spoke social movements’ characterised by the engagement of diverse actors with multiple issues and organisations. Network technologies have enabled mobilisation to occur globally, speedily and directly. The successful use of such strategies in the blogosphere has been the subject of several studies. Kahn & Kellner (2007:91) argue that bloggers are ‘technoactivists’ that combine ‘democratic self-expression’ with ‘networking...global media critique and journalistic socio-political intervention’. The success of blog activism should not be judged purely on political outcomes but should be understood in a wider context in terms of their role in reconfiguring political culture around everyday issues. Online political participation or cyberactivism is a prime example of newer forms of political culture that can help to initiate social change. Thalet (2012:49) cites the ‘Arab Spring’ in Egypt as an example of the important role that cyberspace can play in mobilising mass audiences around shared beliefs to engage successfully in collective advocacy:

The slogan calling for dignity, freedom and social justice was the common ground that created cohesion and unity among thousands of virtually interactive advocates and successfully attracted millions of advocates in the physical space.

Alterman (2011) argues against such a utopian view, pointing out that while social media played an important role in allowing people to see themselves as activists by creating content; in reality it had limited impact on the development of new political parties, since the political structure that existed before the Arab Spring is still in place. While new media has contributed to the reconfiguration of political culture (Kahn & Kellner, 2007), cyberactivism

‘is a necessary but not sufficient complement to real world struggles on behalf of the disempowered’ (Warf & Grimes, 1997: 259).

What became widely known as the Jena 6 case centred on racial tensions in Jena high school in Louisiana, USA, which came to a climax in 2006 when white students hung three nooses on a tree to mark their perceived territory. Given its symbolic reference to lynching, tempers ran high and a white student who was overheard bragging about attacking a black student was himself attacked by African American pupils and suffered mild injuries. However, whilst white students only received temporary suspensions for their part in the conflict, six black students were expelled and subsequently charged as adults with aggravated assault and attempted murder. Kvasny et al (2010: 12) argue that the black blogosphere or ‘Blackosphere’ provided a platform for social activism among African Americans in the Jena 6 case for sharing information, mobilising, organising, fund-raising and communication. Although the incident occurred in 2006, it was not reported by the national press until 2007 after bloggers brought the injustice to the attention of the nation. Up to 20,000 people from across the country travelled to Louisiana to take part in protest rallies. The Jena 6 case became a national symbol of racial injustice and attracted the support of prominent civil rights leaders including Rev. Jessie Jackson and Rev. Al Sharpton. This demonstrates the importance of black blogging communities as alternative platforms for social action ‘to promote economic, social, judicial and educational equity’. However, the authors are quick to point out that online activism occurred alongside traditional channels such as radio, television, newspapers and black social spaces such as churches, barbershops and hair salons. Therefore, for the blogosphere to be utilised most effectively for collective advocacy, it must support and link to traditional offline networks, spaces and organisations and other modes of communication such as television, radio, print media and face-to-face meetings with policymakers.

This section has highlighted the perception of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the age of neoliberalism, characterised by ‘competitive individualism’ (Gilbert, 2013: 31) that serves to undermine collective agency. This manifests through increased interest in personalised political activity amid growing concerns that the internet promotes weak ties and casual engagement with causes (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). However, research demonstrates that the blogosphere, alongside other social media can actually assist in the development of a collective identity termed ‘collective individualism’ (Ting, 2010). This denotes a new, evolved form of collective agency through which participants unite around causes whilst maintaining their

individuality, expressed through attachments to particular issues and through the management of their blogs. A number of studies support the view that the blogosphere can be successfully harnessed for collective advocacy and collective activism including (Kahn & Kellner (2007; Kvasny et al, 2010; Obar et al, 2012; Thalet, 2012; Ting, 2010). These findings demonstrate the viability of blogs as a strategic tool to facilitate collective advocacy and collective activism on behalf of African Caribbean communities in the UK as an incremental step towards social change. The studies discussed here show that effective advocacy and activism is contingent upon the use of the blogosphere as an addition to rather than replacement of traditional channels of communication and the importance of working in conjunction with offline networks and maintaining face-to-face lobbying with decision makers.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has offered a critical assessment of the blogosphere as a medium for collective advocacy and activism as incremental steps towards social change. It reveals the limitations of the blogosphere as a public sphere and realm for engagement in rational debate and consensual outcomes due to the individual orientation of blogs, niche groups and singular perspectives. It has also highlighted the persistent reality of the domination of the internet and blogosphere by white, middle class educated males and their appropriation and colonisation by corporate hegemonies. The use of the internet and blogosphere as counterhegemonic spaces serve to further global systems of domination in which all users are implicated. However, hegemonic struggles should be viewed as a permanent feature of cultural life. Whilst neoliberalism has been charged with promoting competitive individualism, which has implications for collective advocacy and activism; collective individualism represents a new form of advocacy and activism that has emerged within this new era. Several studies provide evidence that blogs can be used successfully for mobilisation and activism in cyberspace, facilitated by social media and supported by offline networks.

## **Chapter 4: Blogs in Context**

One of the objectives of this chapter is to locate blogs within a broader social, political and historical context in order to elucidate the rationale for this study. Arguably, counterhegemonic practice and self-representation through alternative media is not limited to blogs, but also occurs through other forms of social media such as social networking sites. The scope of this study is limited to blogs in order to facilitate in-depth analysis of multiple areas of inquiry not examined in previous studies on the blogosphere. This chapter aims to highlight some of the key factors that differentiate blogs from social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and in doing so deepen understanding on broader motivations for blogging, especially among racialised minorities. The other key objective of this chapter is to illuminate the social, historical and political context of the bloggers in this study as a racialised minority group in Britain. The qualitative findings of this research are based on the constructed narratives of African Caribbean women and men and point to their use of blogs to mediate against racism and marginalisation within British society. This chapter therefore examines the social and political landscape in which these experiences are situated in order to capture a historical moment in the lives of African Caribbean people in Britain.

### **4.1 The alleged demise of blogging and generational differences in blog use**

Blogs and social networking sites are both forms of social media, but blogs are the earliest form with their origins dating back to the late 1990s. Social networking sites emerged the following decade with the introduction of Myspace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004 (Haenlin & Kaplan, 2010). It has been suggested that blogs have outgrown their popularity and are in decline (Kopytoff, 2011). However, a study by Lenhart et al (2010) points to generational differences in blog use: while blogging has declined among teenagers and young adults since 2006, it has increased among older adults. In 2009, only 14% of teenagers said they blog, down from 28% in 2006. In 2007 just 7% of bloggers were aged 30 and over, but this increased to 11% by 2009. Overall, blogging among adults has remained steady but the decline of teenage bloggers corresponds to a rise in their use of social networking sites. In 2006, 55% of teenagers online used social networking sites but by 2009 this rose to 73%, almost double the proportion of users aged 30 and over, which stands at 39%. There is also a marked difference in the way that different generations use social media. Those aged 18-29 are more likely to have a profile on Myspace, while older users aged 30 and over are more likely to use professionally oriented platforms such as LinkedIn. These findings do not point

to a demise of blogging but to a generational shift in the use of social media as part of an evolutionary process as people become more familiar with technology and select ICTs that best suit their lifestyles and preferences. The generational shift is also reflective of the fragmented nature of the new media landscape. Younger internet users are attracted to the greater levels of social interaction that social networking sites offer through instant messaging, status updates and content sharing with friends and acquaintances, but less interested in blogging, which requires more time in researching and writing posts (Haenlin & Kaplan, 2010). The preference for blogs as the desired medium for content production among older internet users is consistent with the demographic profile of the participants in this study who have an average age of 37.

#### **4.2 Motivational differences between blogs and social networking sites**

Brandtzaeg & Heim (2009) suggest that motivations for using social networking sites are focused largely on social interaction: establishing new contacts (31%), maintaining existing contacts (21%) and general socialising (14%). However, the majority of studies on blogging motivations suggest that social interaction is a secondary factor to personal expression and documenting life experiences (Huang et al, 2007; Nardi et al 2004; Papacharissi, 2007). When race is factored into the equation, research suggests that motivations are often extrinsic, centred on filling gaps in the mainstream media, highlighting how social issues impact people of African descent (Pole, 2005) and challenging negative constructions of black identity (Brock et al 2010; Pole, 2009). A study on influential American political bloggers by Ekdale et al (2010) reveals that motivations for blogging increase over time and the greatest increases occur with extrinsic motivations. This suggests that blogs are an ideal platform for online political participation and sustain long term use. This is consistent with the practices of the bloggers in this study as will be discussed in chapters six to nine.

It is argued here that as a platform for content production, blogs afford users greater levels of control of the design, structure, layout and organisation of content and the ability to integrate blogs within personal or business websites on self-hosted domains on the internet. Most social networking sites offer limited opportunities for customisation, although Facebook pages are increasingly used in conjunction with professional and business blogs. By contrast, blogs provide users with the flexibility to integrate content with other personal or professional identities in limitless configurations in a more holistic way. For example, blogs can include portfolios, photo and video galleries, PowerPoints and electronic books to

showcase professional work. Users can also generate income from advertisements, which is not possible on social networking sites, although media conglomerates earn billions of dollars from user profiles. But the most significant factor that differentiates blogs from social networking sites is that while bloggers must compete for audiences with millions of other blogs on the internet, blogs offer users the opportunity to indulge in *public individualism* to a larger extent than is possible on social networking sites. This is a term coined by the author that encapsulates the contradictory nature of a blog as being simultaneously a public and private space (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008) that meets the growing need for competitive individualism (Gilbert, 2013). As highlighted in chapter three, competitive individualism has been attributed to the dominance in western societies of neoliberal hegemonies that promote individualism as the norm, alongside a market-driven ideology, maintained through ruthless competition for personal success. The individual orientation of blogs which are independently managed by users enables them to receive personal gratification and gain personal recognition and respect within an individual space that they own and control, in contrast to the communal space within social networking sites, which constitute a shared platform. Radsch (2008) argues that the blogosphere is a unique and distinctive space which functions as a medium for the expression of identity that is inextricably linked to the social condition of the bloggers. The ability to manage, organise and present content on individually owned and managed platforms enables deeper engagement between bloggers and their audiences. This is especially the case when blogs are integrated with personal and professional websites that include information about different facets of their identity. Research suggests that almost one third of adult internet users maintain profiles on multiple social networking sites (Lenhart et al, 2010), resulting in fragmented online identities. Blogs enable their authors to present their whole identity to the world within their own, self-defined, ideological space. The crude manner in which content is sometimes categorised on social networking sites, such as Facebook's news feed, may result in the simultaneous publishing/sharing of content with contradictory ideological stances. However, social networking sites are useful in helping bloggers to reach wider audiences, therefore bloggers are more likely to maintain profiles on multiple social networking sites in order to promote their blog posts and gain greater visibility for their blogs (Kopytoff, 2011). Therefore, while motivations differ between users of social networking sites and bloggers, both forms of social media are distinct, but complementary and represent a symbiotic co-existence within the new media landscape.

### **4.3 Blogs as historical archives**

Blogs function as a valuable medium for preserving cultural memory alongside traditional archives. As online diaries, they serve the same purpose as traditional diaries as a 'window onto the past'. They reflect the varied dimensions of human life 'in a particular time and place' and 'often provide interesting, insightful or humorous perspectives on contemporary events' (O'Sullivan, 2005:54). Along with other forms of electronic communication, blogs helped to provide an expansive record of the events of September 11 2001, reflecting the growing significance of ICTs as part of America's cultural output. Led by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the Library of Congress archived 30,000 websites between September 11 and December 1 2001. A significant benefit of blogs which is of particular relevance to this thesis is that 'they allow ordinary people and marginalised constituencies...a more important role in the dialogue of history' (Cohen, 2005:10). The diverse perspectives to be found in the blogosphere can lead to new interpretations or help to deepen understanding of a historical moment. For example, digital archives created after September 11, reveal that ordinary Americans viewed the terrorist attacks in personal terms through the loss of loved ones or devastation to their communities and not in nationalistic terms, as might have been expected (Cohen, 2005). During the London bombings in 2005, ordinary citizens caught up in the chaos became accidental journalists, relaying what they had witnessed and offering very personalised accounts of traumatic events. London's blogging community in particular, mobilised to provide news and information including photographs, video clips, survivor's diaries and names of victims, helping to piece events together. Numerous blog posts were used by mainstream news organisations such as the *BBC* and *Guardian*, helping to enrich and further contextualise mainstream reporting on the bombings (Allen, 2006).

Previous research provides useful examples of how blogs have captured pivotal moments in Black History. Moyo's (2011) study on bloggers' reporting of the Zimbabwean elections in 2008 demonstrates the important role that they played in documenting the country's political history in the absence of mainstream journalists. During the elections, extreme press restrictions allegedly resulted in the arrest, torture and murder of professional journalists for criticising the government. Facilitated by Kubatana, a civic organisation focused on democracy and human rights; ordinary citizens used blogs as a platform to produce and disseminate news stories documenting human rights abuses and violence during the elections. Stories reported vote rigging, violence, rape, abductions, torture, hunger and starvation. They captured an important moment in Zimbabwe's political and social history in the wake of censorship and functioned as an alternative public sphere through which opinions were



formulated, nurtured and sustained during the elections. They also deepened understanding of counterhegemonic forms of resistance against an oppressive government. Another useful study (Brock, 2009) examined websites maintained by African Americans (most of which were blogs) in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Analysis of the content reveals their observations and experiences of racism. For example, African Americans were referred to as refugees, whereas whites were automatically assumed to be American citizens. This culminated in American-born blacks being refused relief that was provided to foreign-born white Americans. As Brock (2009:103) argues, African Americans used blogs 'to express their entitlement to citizenship in a country they were born in, worked in and died for'. Racist representations of African Americans during Hurricane Katrina have been well documented by academics and intellectuals. This includes analysis of the mainstream media's tendency to associate African Americans with crime and violence and inaccurate reporting of criminality where whites were depicted as survivors and blacks as looters (Sommers et al, 2006; Troutt, 2006). However, blogs capture the unique and personalised perspectives of ordinary African Americans on a major national disaster that occurred in the largely black population of New Orleans. Their blogs represent 'a coherent presentation of African American identity' while further demonstrating how blogs were appropriated 'to reify their right to citizenship and humanity' (Brock, 2009:104).

Bressey (2006:51) argues that historical archives in Britain often exclude or fail to capture the presence and experiences of people of colour, resulting in a 'Whiteness of Britishness'. The role that blogs can play in capturing ethnic and cultural diversity is therefore of major significance. According to historian Mary Friedman, blogs can serve an important function in documenting social history. Mommy bloggers (mothers who blog about their family and life experiences) are co-creators 'of maternal history...the history of mothers at this moment in time' (Friedman, cited in Leow, 2010:238). It is further argued that all topic-based blogs can be regarded as 'archives in the making' and therefore every blog 'is a potential historical source' (Leow, 2010:239). Using the same logic as Friedman and Leow, it is argued here that through the practice of 'blogging while black' explained in section 2.3, black bloggers can be conceptualised as co-creators of Black History. The blogs featured in this study and the narratives of the bloggers analysed in this research are of great significance in capturing the history of African Caribbeans in British society in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **4.4 Key moments in the social, political and racial landscape in Britain 2009-2012**

This section reflects on the social and political landscape in Britain in the immediate years preceding the research in 2012 and examines some of the racial undercurrents in existence. It aims to place the practices and activities of the bloggers in this study within a historical context in order to deepen understanding of how their experiences as a racialised minority group are linked to their use of blogs as counterhegemonic practice. The period 2009-2012 has been selected based on the length of time the participants have been blogging, since a large proportion (40%) have been blogging for more than three years. The intention here is to provide an outline of some of the key moments during this period that are of significance to African Caribbean people in Britain.

#### **4.4.1 2009: The dawn of post racialism and racial neoliberalism**

In January 2009, Barack Obama became the first black president of the US and his ascendancy to the White House prompted a new post-racial discourse both in the US and UK. Writing for the BBC from Washington, Connolly (2009) declared: ‘because of the colour his skin’ President Obama is ‘a character in the long and painful story of America’s evolution away from a past of racial division and violence’. Meanwhile in the UK, Trevor Phillips who presided over the Commission for Equality and Human Rights declared the term ‘institutionally racist’ all but obsolete. Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s Today programme, he claimed that attitudes had changed markedly in Britain in the last decade for the better. Only two years prior, in 2007, Phillips warned that Britain was becoming more segregated. Yet following the inauguration of Barack Obama he suggested that using the term ‘Paki’ as Prince Harry did, or the term ‘Sooty’ used by Prince Charles in reference to people from ethnic minority backgrounds was not indicative of racism (see Siddique, 2009). Kapoor (2011) argues that liberals seized the election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the US as evidence of a post-racial era. While it was a symbolic victory for African Americans it also served to perpetuate a colour-blind ideology premised on the concept of meritocracy. It also signalled the advancement of ‘racial neoliberalism’, the process of ‘de-racialisation in order to promote post-racialism’ (De Genova, 2010 cited in Kapoor, 2011:1028). This manifests in discourse that asserts that race is no longer the primary determinant of social and economic outcomes, and to name and acknowledge race is deemed problematic. The neoliberal agenda seeks to erase race from the public sphere altogether, leading to the ‘privatisation of race and racial expression’ (Kapoor, 2011:1034). The trend towards neoliberalism can be seen in New Labour’s replacement of race with ‘community cohesion’ in the years preceding the coalition government, which blames cultural difference

for segregation, social unrest and social instability. Kapoor further argues that post-racial discourse in Britain reflects the similarities in economic policy shared with its ally, the US, which inevitably results in shared strategies for racial policy and governance.

The euphoria that followed Barack Obama's inauguration and hopes for racial harmony in Britain was temporarily halted by the racist rants of Carol Thatcher in February, who referred to French tennis star Jo-Wilfried Tsonga repeatedly as a 'golliwog frog' and 'half golliwog' backstage on the set of the BBC's Green Room (Bryant, 2009). Although the BBC sacked Thatcher, media coverage was largely focused on speculating who leaked the story, with some attempts to present Thatcher as a victim. In an opinion piece, Norman (2009) suggested that Thatcher's racial abuse was due to ignorance rather than malice and attacked the BBC for being overzealous. According to Norman, 'Poor Carol' was guilty only of being too stupid to comprehend why the term golliwog was offensive:

...even if the French player Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, whom I assume she had in mind, does bear a passing resemblance to the character on the old Robertson's jar, this is the sort of phrase not to be uttered again on BBC soil...

There is a tacit implication that Norman shares her view on the resemblance but deems her naïve for expressing this openly. He later reinforces Thatcher as the victim:

To sack so good-natured a character for an imbecile remark in a private conversation, and cause her far more distress than she herself could have caused, is in its comparatively trifling way...absurd...(Norman, 2009).

As argued in section 2.4, media coverage of racist discourse by whites frequently frame them as innocent gaffes instead of indicators of racist beliefs (Hill, 2008; Law, 2000). The term golliwog is based on the 1895 book *The adventures of two Dutch Dolls and a golliwog* and is modelled on 'a grotesque nigger (minstrel) doll' (Pieterse, 1992:157). It is a by-product of the late Victorian/early Edwardian eras at the height of slavery and colonialism when 'blacks in America and England were the routine target of popular mockery, with or without mob violence'. The abbreviation of golliwog to 'wog' later became a popular term of racial abuse in the 1970s and 1980s. This demonstrates that the origins of racism in Britain is linked to 'white visions of identity' premised on 'imperial attitudes and assumptions' that positions white racial identity as synonymous with Britishness and infinitely superior to racialised

others. The legacy of racist ideologies associated with slavery and colonialism has continued to frame race relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Sherwood, 2003).

Ironically, February also saw the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Macpherson report, initiated 10 years earlier following the racially motivated murder of black undergraduate student, Stephen Lawrence. It led to the charge that public institutions, especially the police, were institutionally racist. However, Justice Secretary Jack Straw told the BBC (2009) that the Metropolitan Police is no longer institutionally racist. The sentiment was echoed by the Lead Officer on race and diversity at the Association of Chief Police Officers, who insisted that the term is 'unfair' and 'unhelpful' since the police had learnt 'from past events' (Slack, 2009). Academics at the University of Portsmouth led by Professor Savage joined the chorus of dissenters against the term institutional racism:

There's no doubt there are still incidents of unintentional discrimination in procedures. But there's a world of difference between that and saying that the police force is institutionally racist. That term no longer applies to the entire Metropolitan Police force (Portsmouth News, 2009).

Phillips (2011:175) argues that while the term institutional racism is somewhat ambiguous, it has relevance when situated within a conceptual framework that includes racialisation. Racialisation is a multi-layered approach that acknowledges intersectionality and recognises assumptions of racial inferiority. According to her, the problem with 'institutional racism' is that it lacks personal accountability, placing emphasis on organisational structures and systems, which are somewhat abstract. Institutional 'racialisation' acknowledges 'the need to account for individuals' roles in implementing regulations, procedures and policies which produce unequal outcomes for particular racial and ethnic groups'.

#### **4.4.2 2010: Ethnic minority representation in Parliament doubles in General Election**

Post-racial discourse continued to dominate public discussion on race relations and in January 2010, Communities Secretary John Denham declared that class trumped race as the principal driver of social inequality. Consequently, The Equality Act (2010) rushed through Parliament by the New Labour Government ahead of the May General Election included a socioeconomic duty obligating public bodies to demonstrate strategies to tackle class disadvantage (BBC News, 2010). The Equality Act (2010) is indicative of the transformation in public policy and discourse from an emphasis on tackling racial discrimination supported

by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000) to promoting equality and diversity. Ironically, the announcement came in the wake of an Institute for Public Policy Research (2010) study revealing that almost half of all black people (48%) were out of work and the rate of unemployment among black youths aged 16 to 24 was double that of whites. Pilkington (2008) argues that since 2001, the obligation to promote race equality has been superseded by 'a new nationalist discourse centred on community cohesion and integration'. Government, academic and media support for the concept of institutional racism advanced by the Macpherson Report in 1999 was short-lived and overtaken by critiques of multiculturalism, because the concept of institutional racism is perceived as a threat to social cohesion. This is evidenced by the 'media hysteria' that greeted the publication of the Parekh Report in 2000. The negative press coverage demonstrates that the intention of the report, to set out a new vision for progressive race relations in multi-ethnic Britain failed 'to capture the national popular imagination' (McLaughlin & Neal, 2008:155).

The 2010 General Election in May signalled the demise of New Labour, ending its reign as the longest-serving Labour Party government in British history. The Conservatives won the largest share of the vote but could not claim outright victory, forcing a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. A YouGov Poll in July soliciting voters' opinions on the reasons for Labour's defeat cited immigration, the economy and poor leadership by Gordon Brown as the principal causes (Quinn 2011). However, New Labour's defeat was not limited to losing the General Election; it also lost its monopoly as the main party representing ethnic minorities in Britain. The number of ethnic minority MPs almost doubled from 14 to 27, but of greatest significance is the fact that 'the longstanding pattern of minority politicians representing seats with high minority populations has been broken for good' (Sobolewska, 2010:615). A large number of ethnic minority MPs secured seats in areas with low ethnic minority populations. This was attributed to a deliberate strategy by the Labour and Conservative parties to increase ethnic minority representation in Parliament, in response to predictions of a large swing away from Labour. Shabana Mahmood became the first Muslim woman to be elected to Parliament and Helen Grant became the first black woman to win a seat at Westminster (Hirsch, 2010).

#### **4.4.3 2011: Multiculturalism attacked; 'riots' blamed on black culture**

The year started with an attack on multiculturalism by Prime Minister David Cameron in February:

...we have allowed the weakening of our collective identity. Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream (cited in Gilroy, 2012:385).

Gilroy argues that Cameron presents ethnic difference as a societal problem that threatens the stability of the nation, with Muslims being the central focus of his concern. Attacks on multiculturalism by the previous Labour Government suggest that its contested nature is evidenced by the fact that those on the left only support it as form of social control while those on the right regard it as a threat to national stability. The othering of Muslims and racialised minorities is integral to British culture since Britishness is associated with the white majority population (Pilkington, 2008).

In August, a 29 year-old father of four of mixed heritage, Mark Duggan, was shot dead by a Metropolitan police officer in Tottenham, north London, sparking a wave of national protests. What started as a peaceful demonstration outside Tottenham Police Station on 6 August descended into violence as petrol bombs were thrown at police and buildings and shops were set alight. By 8 August protests flared up in several other British cities including Birmingham, Liverpool, Nottingham, Bristol and Manchester. It emerged later that Duggan was not in possession of a firearm at the time of his attempted arrest but an inquest ruled his death lawful (BBC News, 2014). The public discourse after August 2011 delegitimised the idea that events represented protests against injustice and instead were used to mount further attacks against multiculturalism. Speaking on BBC Question Time, historian David Starkey used the events to demonise black communities and the white working class. He suggested that they constitute a criminal underclass motivated purely by a desire to acquire consumer goods through illegal means: 'these weren't protests, these were shopping with violence' (cited in Jensen, 2013:1:3). Through this discourse, the concerns and frustrations of those who participated in the unrest were swept aside, and served the purpose of 'personalising and individualising property and disadvantage' (Jensen, 2013:5:4). Since Starkey's professional interests lie with the upper classes, his racialisation of the riots also reflect a distaste of the working class, who he claims have adopted a 'black' identity. In blaming black culture for widespread public disorder he 'essentialises whiteness as good (and English) and blackness as its antithesis' (Phoenix & Phoenix, 2012:62). Much of the negative media coverage that racialised the riots focused on young black males and the working class, demonstrating that

contemporary racism is intersectional in nature with its emphasis on race, class and gender. Gaudio & Bialostok (2006) argue that there is a tendency among white middle class social actors to attribute social and economic inequalities among racialised minorities to cultural differences, which are often perceived as deficiencies. In doing so they fail to acknowledge white privilege or barriers based on race and class, and take no responsibility for addressing racial inequality, since they perceive that assimilating into 'white' culture will lead to social and economic advancement. Culture is therefore perceived as a hierarchical system of values in which white, middle class cultural values are routinely accepted as superior to those of racialised minorities. Culture has therefore become a mask that hides racist ideology since there is rarely any historical reference to the fact that the political and economic systems in the US and elsewhere are racially stratified and promote white racial power and privilege. Although racism was once premised on presumed biological differences, culture is now invoked as a justification for racial inequalities and 'effectively serves as a euphemism for race' (Gaudio & Bialostok, 2006:54).

Later in 2011, Emma West, a white working class mother of two became infamous when her racial abuse hurled at ethnic minority passengers on a Croydon tram was posted on YouTube. On the video she is seen shouting 'you're black; you ain't British. Go back to where you came from' (Ferguson, 2011). She was later convicted of racially aggravated disorderly behaviour (BBC News, 2013). However, despite the explicit and abhorrent nature of the racial abuse, echoing the Carol Thatcher incident the previous year, there were once again attempts to present her as a victim. Simon Woolley, head of Operation Black Vote suggested that West be shown 'compassion' (Woolley, 2011). Racial neoliberalism resurfaced with renewed attacks on multiculturalism. Writing for the Libertarian, an organisation that describes itself as 'a free market and civil liberties think tank', Henderson (2011) reflects on the reasons why West, described as 'respectably dressed', 'reasonably bright' and 'not on the margins of society' should resort to racist abuse:

I suggest it was simply desperation. She lives her life constantly bombarded by the multicultural propaganda and unlike the white liberal elite probably encounters circumstances every day in which she finds herself in the ethnic minority in her own country. She will feel that her country has been invaded, whilst at the same time being denied any opportunity to protest...

West is presented as a respectable, intelligent, working class woman who is used to symbolise Britishness and her racial abuse is decriminalised as a reasonable justification for speaking out against racialised others whose ‘culture’ causes social instability in Britain. The racist rant of Emma West and some of the responses that followed her case illustrate how social media both exposes different levels of racism in Britain and provides a haven for those with far right views. While Emma West’s views are at odds with the idea of Britain as a racially tolerant society, her sentiment echoes the resentment of multicultural Britain apparent in Prime Minister David Cameron’s speech in February 2011 (Gilroy, 2012).

#### **4.4.4 2012: Justice for Stephen Lawrence; ethnic diversity marks London 2012 brand**

January 2012 brought the conviction of Gary Dobson and David Norris for the murder of Stephen Lawrence marking the conclusion of a 20-year campaign for justice. The Independent (2012) ran a story headlined: ‘The life and legacy of Stephen Lawrence’ which featured interviews with the parents of the murdered teenager. Speaking of her son’s life, Doreen Lawrence said:

Now that we have some sort of justice, I want people to think of Stephen other than as a black teenager murdered in a racist attack in south-east London...I want him to be remembered as a bright young man...He was a wonderful son and a shining example of what any parent would want in a child. Hopefully now he can rest in peace.

However, the political significance of the events and actions that followed the death of Stephen Lawrence, driven largely by the persistence of his parents is now embedded in the history of race relations in Britain as Hall et al (2013: introduction) assert:

Arguably the most significant single event that was ultimately to propel the issue of violent racism to the top of the political and social agenda was the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in April 1993.

The London 2012 Olympics which commenced in July provided ‘an opportunity to rebrand a post-imperial, multicultural Britain’. Consequently, ‘the London 2012 bid emphasised London’s role as a beacon for world youth, diversity and cultural experience’ and the epitome of racial harmony. Publicity material contained in the official bid documents drew heavily on the ethnically diverse boroughs of Greenwich, Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest as the ‘Olympic boroughs’ and presented visual images of multi-ethnic



youth. Black and Asian British athletes were at the centre of promotions for the London 2012 brand. Such images project a ‘multiculturalist nationalism’ where citizens are ‘let in’ while their presence supports the image of Britain as a racially tolerant society. In essence ‘race forms part of a spectacle that symbolises conservative, corporatised, “Britishness”’ (Silk, 2011:742). The reduction of ethnic diversity to ‘vibrant and creative multiculturalism’ in order to ‘depict a sense of unity and cohesion’ also helped present the Olympics as a solution to racial inequalities. London 2012 therefore became a paradox in which black and minority ethnic communities were:

symbols of happiness and hope, but also victims to be empowered, both positions being easy, reductionist and commodified versions of diverse ethnic communities’ (Hylton & Morpeth, 2012:10).

The structural inequalities entrenched in sport were seized upon by some sections of the mainstream media. As the Guardian highlighted, more than one third of Britain’s Olympic medallists attended private schools, exposing class privilege:

The proportion of privately educated Olympic winners (37%) is similar to that for MPs (35%) but less than leading journalists (54%) or judges (70%) according to previous Sutton Trust studies (Vasagar, 2012).

The class divide in sports highlighted by the 2012 Olympics led a number of policymakers, including Lloyd Moynihan, chair of the British Olympic Association, to call for ‘an overhaul of school sports policy to redress the balance (Vasagar, 2012).

Gold medallists Somalian-born Mo Farah and Jessica Ennis, whose father is Jamaican, were at the forefront of media coverage celebrating Britain’s Olympic success. Both were hailed as key contributors to ‘the finest hour in British athletics history’ on Saturday 6 August when they became Olympic champions (BBC, 2012). However, while they are two of the most admired and high-profile Olympians of the 2012 Games, analysis of media coverage revealed differential treatment in the press in terms of how their identities were presented. While Ennis was most frequently referred to in relation to her local origins in Sheffield, Farah was most often referred to as being Somalian-born. English was not used in reference to either athlete in terms of their identity, although it was frequently mentioned that Farah could not speak English when he first came to Britain. The term ‘black’ was not used to identity either athlete, but Farah’s religious identity as a Muslim was mentioned more than his upbringing in

Hounslow, London (Allen & Blinder, 2012). This suggests that British citizens from ethnic minority backgrounds are sometimes ‘denied a full sense of national belonging (or “cultural citizenship”) because of their plural identities...’(Jackson, 1998:103) and because English identity is based on constructions of whiteness. Therefore, while the 2012 Olympics represented a vision of ‘the Commonwealth as a contemporary collective achievement’ (Werbner, 2013:415), it also bore elements of ‘stylish nihilism’ defined as ‘a stylish hybridity in which multicultural performers take centre stage, yet offer but a thin veneer obscuring a (social) structure, that essentialises and stereotypes difference, and ignores the historically entrenched ““race”-based inequalities responsible for (masked) social divisions’ (Silk, 2012:743).

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the key factors that differentiate blogs from other forms of social media and demonstrates their relevance and suitability as the central focus of this research. While media hype in some sections of the mainstream media imply the imminent demise of blogging, studies show that generational differences exist in the use of social media. Blogs are the preferred medium for literary-based content production among internet users over 30. Furthermore, with regards to political bloggers, motivations increase over time and therefore sustain long-term use, making blogs an ideal medium for online political participation. As historical archives blogs have played an important role in capturing key moments in history such as the terrorist attacks in the USA on September 11 2001 and the London bombings in 2005. Of greater significance to this thesis however, is the role of bloggers as curators of Black History and co-creators of social history, helping to generate new levels of understanding on the lives of racialised minorities who are often excluded or marginalised in national historical archives. In combination with the findings presented in chapters six to nine, the social contextualisation provided here helps to demonstrate the role that blogs have played in the lives of black Britons and their significance for racialised minorities within the new media landscape.

## Chapter 5: Methods and Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the research questions at the centre of this study, the research methods adopted for this project, the selected approach and rationale. It outlines the data collection and analysis methods, the limitations of the research methods and strategies adopted to ensure the academic rigour of the study. This chapter also includes a personalised narrative for the purpose of reflection on the experience of blogging. Its inclusion aims to make transparent the process of gathering research data for this project through virtual ethnography, cyberethnography and autobiographical ethnography. It focuses on three main objectives: providing a historical context to the research project; documenting how blogging experience informs the study and revealing the complexities and challenges of researching bloggers as an active member of the blogging community.

### 5.1 Research objectives and questions

This study is motivated by a need to understand the use of blogs by African Caribbean people in the UK as social, cultural and counterhegemonic practice. Whilst there is a growing body of research on blogs, the use of blogs by ethnic minority groups in the UK is an under-developed area of inquiry. Researching blog use by African Caribbean people contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the blogosphere and complements existing research on internet studies and on race and ethnicity in cultural production.

This study on African Caribbean bloggers in the UK is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the motivations for becoming bloggers?
2. What gratifications are obtained from authoring blogs?
3. How are blogs used to address issues of representation within the mainstream media?
4. What are the perceptions of the bloggers of the wider social and political impact of their blogs?

As explained in section 2.2, this thesis broadens the scope of inquiry beyond the psychological needs linked to motivation and gratification, which has tended to be the focus of much research on the blogosphere. As a critical race study, the impact of race on motivation and gratification is also explored, with emphasis on the use of blogs to facilitate self-representation and address marginalisation within British society. While other research on the blogosphere draws solely on uses and gratifications theory, this study is also

approached through CRT, which will be discussed in detail in section 5.2. Because of the use of CRT with its emphasis on centring the black experience, research question 4 is not concerned with measuring or quantifying social impact, but rather in understanding through the narratives of African Caribbean bloggers how they use blogs as a platform for community empowerment.

## **5.2 Approach to the study**

The methodology is influenced by three key factors. Firstly, that the researcher is a member of the group being studied, both as a long term blogger and as an African Caribbean woman resident in the UK. The researcher is keen to contextualise her experience as a member of this group by approaching the study from the position of a co-participant, as opposed to an outside observer and to make transparent the process of gathering knowledge on blogging practice as an ‘insider’. Secondly, that the voices of the participants are centred in the research and thirdly, that critical theories relevant to race and gender are embedded in the research process. A further principle that guides this research project is a desire for the research to be emancipatory. The methodology employed here utilises an eclectic mix of methods to capture the complexities of the research project and is deemed by the author to be the most effective strategy for answering the research questions. The use of certain research methods within this study, including in-depth interviews, virtual ethnography, cyberethnography and autobiographical ethnography as integral elements of the mixed methods approach, encompass the principles of the ‘transformative emancipatory paradigm’ (Humphries, Mertens & Truman, 2000). This approach emphasizes the importance of recognising cultural differences and within this paradigm, the interaction between the researcher and the participant is of major importance as during the interview process both must seek to make their values explicit and create the knowledge that produces the study.

The aim of emancipatory research is to give a voice to marginalised groups and to enable them to become subjects of research as opposed to objects of research. The emancipatory approach identifies that power is embedded in traditional research and it aims to change the balance of power between the researcher and the research subject in order to put the relationship on a more equal footing (Humphries *et al*, 2000). Using virtual ethnography and cyberethnography as research methods in this project, not only deepens the understanding between the researcher and participants, but also shifts the balance of power since the researcher becomes part of the group being studied and is able to interpret the practice being

researched from the perspective of the participants. Emancipatory goals are also embedded within the transformative emancipatory paradigm since it frames race and ethnicity and other aspects of diversity from the perspective of a social cultural minority group, so that the defining characteristics are viewed as a dimension of human difference and not as a defect. This study employs a mixed methods approach, involving both quantitative and qualitative research methods, drawing on a range of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and research techniques, which will be fully discussed in this section. The decision to use a mixed methods approach was based on the view that using diverse a range of complementary methods produces superior results in comparison with a singular approach. For example, using mixed methods can provide stronger evidence for a conclusion through corroboration of findings and can add insights that might be missed through using a singular approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004; Creswell, 2003).

This study uses critical race theory (CRT) to frame the historical experience of African Caribbean people within the mainstream media and to highlight how the mainstream media sometimes reproduces racism through discourse. CRT is an interdisciplinary movement comprised of scholars and activists that seek to study and transform the relationship between race, racism and power and was developed in the 1970s by legal scholars, activists and lawyers. The late Derek Bell is widely regarded as the founding father of the intellectual movement and key proponents include Alan Freedman, Richard Delgado, Kimberle Crenshaw, Angela Harris and Charles Lawrence. The basic principles of CRT are that racism is deeply ingrained within the fabric of American society to the extent that it has become normalised, taken-for-granted and appears natural. CRT is more than a theoretical framework, but should be regarded as praxis, as to realise its potential requires CRT to be embedded within the practices of research. 'Where a CRT framework is only partially applied in theory rather than practice then critical researchers could be accused of talking the talk, but not walking the walk,' (Hylton, 2012:36). To help researchers 'walk the walk' Hylton (2012) offers a list of key considerations for CRT methodologies which includes elements such as a social justice focus, centring the black voice and black experience, a challenge to oppression and subordination, a strategic challenge to racism, counter storytelling, and intersectionality. This serves as a useful guide for the overall approach to this study to ensure that it remains true to the spirit of CRT. However, it also poses challenging questions to the author of this study, in terms of how to elicit positive social transformation through this research project. This fear has been countered by acknowledging that a key purpose of CRT is the centring of

the black voice and the black experience. This is not a gesture of goodwill, but rather a strategy to ensure that the principles of CRT are realised in practice, not just in terms of inclusiveness, but in terms of ‘offering [participants] the promise/potential to influence change’ (Hylton, 2012:34). In this research project African Caribbean bloggers are co-participants of the study and therefore function as social actors and agents of change. By bearing witness to their experiences; their views, perspectives and perceptions will help generate new levels of understanding that will act as a foundation for social transformation.

CRT is deemed by the author to be especially useful as a praxis, since the main objective of this research project is to capture the perspectives of African Caribbean bloggers in the UK. Blogs can be regarded as complex forms of cultural expression that allow individuals to express their views and opinions and in doing so, construct their own narratives. One of the principle tenets of CRT is that it is grounded in the experiences of people of colour. As Milner (2007: 391) argues: ‘From critical race theory perspectives, knowledge can and should be generated through the narratives and counter-narratives that emerge from and with people of colour.’ Through this process, they are able to construct their own reality (Ladson-Billings and Tate cited in Milner, 2007), ensuring that they are actively involved in the process of constructing knowledge. Advocates of CRT acknowledge that there are weaknesses associated with storytelling that may raise questions over the validity and reliability of narratives that could amount to distorted perspectives based on oppressive experiences (Hylton, 2012). However, Delgado (1989:230) argues that any event can be interpreted in different ways depending on the perspective of the person constructing the narrative. This necessarily results in divergent stories. However, CRT does not claim stories represent a single truth, but rather, that ‘they can open new windows into reality...’

This research project will employ the technique of participatory witnessing during the interview process. Engagement with alternative analytical and interpretive approaches is a necessary strategy to help ‘capture the complexities of the social worlds we seek to understand’ (Taylor, 1998:53). Drawing on theories of Black feminism, African feminism, womanism and Africana womanism, (which all address critical issues of race, class and gender and incorporate an Afrocentric perspective in varying degrees); Taylor (1998) proposes a new research technique called ‘participatory witnessing’ as an adapted version of participatory observation. Afrocentricity is defined as:

An intellectual quality of thought, practice and perspective, where the scholar perceives Africans as subjects and wilful agents of phenomena who act from their own historical and cultural image for human interests (Asante, 2006:648).

Participatory witnessing is a move away from participant observation where, as hooks (2000) observes, white researchers often study non-white peoples as objects, placing them in a position of inferiority within privileged discourses on race. Participant witnesses bear testimony and listen in a way that encourages self-representation as opposed to other-representation. It is argued that researchers should consider an interview as an act of testimony, and in doing so 'seek to tell the stories of self and others and to advocate for those who cannot' (Tarpley, 1995:2) Bearing testimony can be regarded as an active form of resistance against hegemony by telling one's own story and defining one's own reality. Bearing witness during the process of an interview 'involves an active engagement of the self in order to create the space in which to share in the experience of others' (Taylor, 1998: 58) which serves to validate the experience of those bearing witness. Participatory witnessing can therefore be seen as a critical approach that requires the researcher to engage in critical self-reflection to facilitate accurate representation of the stories. Participatory witnessing also draws on one of the key characteristics CRT as previously mentioned. Storytelling and counter storytelling are strategies for privileging the black voice and centring the black experience (Delgado & Stefanie, 2001; Hylton, 2012).

Another key consideration that has guided the approach to this study is that the majority of the participants are women. The sampling procedures are explained later in this chapter, but there was no attempt on the author's part to recruit predominantly female participants. Since the sample is small, it is not possible to generalise this gender split to the wider African Caribbean population to suggest that more women than men participate in blogging. However, given the known patterns of discrimination in relation to raced and gendered identities, this study employs the African feminist paradigm articulated by Steady (1987) which draws on an Afrocentric perspective. These frameworks are complementary to CRT and enhance its potential to uncover issues of intersectionality in relation to race and gender. Furthermore, incorporating an Afrocentric perspective into this study places at the centre of the author's consciousness, 'a theoretical paradigm that is grounded in the cultural and historical experiences of African people' (Blay, 2008:60).

The researcher's own experience of blogging both prior to and throughout the course of the research project has been an important source of experiential learning in terms of understanding aspects of the practice that are not easily detected through questionnaires and interviews. This is because meanings are derived through direct engagement in the process of creating, publishing and maintaining a blog, through interactions with other bloggers and reflection on those experiences. This forms part of the research methods encompassing elements of virtual ethnography, cyberethnography and autobiographical, ethnographic research. In virtual ethnography the researcher is no longer engaged in face-to-face contact with the participants being studied, 'but interacts with them through the means of electronic communication' (Hine, 2000:14). A more enriched form of research 'is produced by embracing and reflecting on these apparent impacts of technology where they occur, as an intrinsic part of the research process' Hine (2000:15). Virtual ethnography can be seen in a broader context as a research strategy that facilitates an understanding of social life as a lived experience. When researching ICTs and people's use of them, such as blogs and blogging practices, participating within this communications ecology helps to deepen understanding. Cyberethnography refers to the process by which 'a researcher becomes a user and enters the environment she studies in order to live, to work and to do things in and within these spaces' (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007:3). Being online and offline are not separate activities but in reality are 'intersecting and interweaving experiences'. Internet users cannot disassociate themselves from a lifetime of offline experiences that have made them who they are, since online identities are to a large degree shaped by these experiences. In cyberethnography the researcher embeds herself into the epistemological space of the activities under inquiry, in what the authors refer to as 'the epistemology of doing'. Whilst bearing similarity to the concept of virtual ethnography, cyberethnography places greater emphasis on the interdependence and co-existence of online and offline identities, and on the process of experiential learning that occurs through the enactment of everyday activities within cyberspace.

Hannabuss (2000) argues that when research takes place, the researcher is 'actually there' and that this process of 'being there' can be viewed as autobiographical ethnography. In this respect, the researcher is not just the person who writes up the data but is an actor in the research process who tries to derive meaning by reflecting on the experience of conducting research. Including one's self in the research can be problematic, raising the question of



subjectivity, since scientific research is premised on the principles of objectivity, emotional distance and a clear demarcation between the researcher and participant. But according to Hannabuss (2000), despite these conflicts, the reality of ‘being there’ is an inseparable part of the research process, since ethnographic researchers are deeply implicated in the lives of the people they study. A metaphor used to illustrate the process of ‘being there’ in ethnographic research is in being inside the body of a whale where: ‘in a very real sense, the researcher is weaving his/her own autobiography with the research when inside-the-whale research is carried out’ (Hannabuss 2000:104). Being part of the research process for example, as a blogger who is studying other bloggers, enables the researcher to relate more authentically to the lives of the people being researched, thereby enriching the research process. The researcher’s experience as a blogger will be documented later in this chapter.

Some of the qualitative research methods that will be employed in this study frequently attract charges of subjectivity, during a process of what it is often claimed should be an ‘objective identification and gathering of evidence’ (Hannabuss, 2000). However, conceptual approaches such as the transformative emancipatory paradigm both acknowledge and recognise the importance of values in research. For, although science is an empirically based tradition, it is also influenced by values (Humphries *et al*, 2000). Furthermore, claims of objectivity in any type of research are problematic, since ‘All research is value-laden and is inevitably political, since it represents the interests of particular (usually powerful, usually white male) groups’ (Humphries, 2000:181-182). Therefore, the notion of ‘fully objective and value-free research is a myth’ (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004:16). Whilst a mixed methods approach has many advantages over singular methods there are still potential weaknesses such as problems with mixing paradigms, the qualitative analysis of quantitative data and the interpretation of conflicting results. However, despite these potential pitfalls and although many research procedures and methods are often linked with certain paradigms; ‘this linkage between research paradigms and research methods is neither sacrosanct nor necessary’ (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004:15). Furthermore, as has been argued in relation to CRT: ‘there is no one narrow methodological approach, nor a reductionist predetermined set of agendas’ (Hylton, 2012:28) that should limit its use.

### **5.3 Data collection, analysis, reliability and validity**

Some of the participants are already known to the researcher through common membership of an online directory for African Caribbean bloggers called Black Bloggers UK and

International Network. This directory was established by the researcher in 2011 and currently has over 150 members. Initial members for this group were sourced from an online directory for African Caribbean businesses and websites, and further members recruited through the snowballing technique by following links to other blogs from the original blogs selected. Additional participants to the study have been recruited via invitations sent through emails and posted on Facebook and Twitter. Snowballing is a non-random sampling technique, but the approach employed here to recruit participants also includes elements of accidental sampling. This is where the researcher determines the size of the sample and collects data on that number of individuals (Leming, 1997). The final sample consists of 30 participants of which 26 are women and four are men. There are obvious disadvantages to using non-probability sampling procedures, such being unable to generalise the results to a larger population. However, in defence of this strategy, other methods employed by researchers to obtain random samples that involve using blog tracking sites such as Technorati and Blogger are not feasible since the ethnicity of the blog owners is not recorded and the bloggers can be based anywhere in the world. This study requires a specific sample of African Caribbean bloggers based only within the UK. Other practical considerations that influenced the choice of sampling procedures was that due to the relatively small population of UK-based African Caribbean bloggers, accidental sampling and snowball sampling were the most effective strategies for identifying individuals within this population. For the purpose of maintaining anonymity, the bloggers' real names have been replaced with pseudonyms in chapters four and five which present their constructed narratives and includes extracts from the interviews.

A questionnaire has been used in the first instance to collect demographic information such as ethnicity, gender, age, educational background and blogging practices, which serve a useful purpose for comparisons with other studies. This also highlights the factors that make African Caribbean people most likely to become bloggers. The significance of the questionnaire is in illuminating areas for more detailed investigation based on the unique responses of each participant. The questionnaire takes the form of an online survey, which has many advantages both to researcher and participant, over questionnaires distributed by post. These include: flexibility, timeliness, convenience, question diversity and cost. The flexibility of online surveys offers several formats, including survey forms embedded within emails and emails which include a link to a separate URL. Online surveys are time efficient, since they reduce the time it takes to create a survey using word processing software, printing the questionnaires and then mailing them out. Furthermore, online surveys are beneficial to

participants; since they can complete the survey at a convenient time to suit themselves, take as much time as needed to complete the questions and even start the survey and resume it at a later time. The nature of online surveys also means that the technical capability is available to use multiple types of questions from single response to multiple choice and even open-ended questions. The survey can also be constructed so that a participant must complete a question before proceeding to the next question and completing the survey. This can avoid the need to void incorrectly completed questionnaires. Finally, the self-administering aspect of online surveys means that the costs are fairly low. However, certain factors must be taken into account that could otherwise undermine the benefits of online surveys. (Evans & Mather, 2005) For example, the self-administering of online surveys is a potential weakness, as if the instructions are ambiguous, participants may exit without completing the survey out of frustration. This risk was minimised at the survey design stage and through testing the survey first.

The second stage of the research project involves in-depth interviews to explore the use of blogs, to uncover the motivations for blogging and gratification obtained from authorship. The interviews are semi-structured with a draft guide prepared of areas for discussion that link both to the research questions and the responses to the questionnaire. Seventeen interviews were conducted face-to-face at the British Library in London during July 2012, and 13 interviews were conducted over the telephone. All of the interviews were captured on a digital recorder, for which prior consent was obtained from the participants. Thematic data analysis has been used to analyse the interviews by examining commonality, differences and relationships, using an inductive approach to identify key themes emerging from the data, as outlined by Harding (2013), LeCompte (2000) and Thomas (2006). The interviews were transcribed and summarised, *apriori* codes were created to reflect categories linked to the research questions and empirical codes created to reflect commonalities, differences and relationships not previously considered that emerged from the data. Conceptual themes were then identified and analysed.

The third stage of the mixed methods approach to this research project involves discourse analysis used in chapter seven, section 7.2 that employs the language-in-use method developed by James Gee (2005, 2011). This method not only takes account of language structure but also seeks to capture the social, cultural and political meanings of talk and text. The decision to use discourse analysis as a research method links to CRT and the emphasis on storytelling. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, blogs are a platform for the construction

of narratives and are a form of storytelling. The decision to use the language-in-use method of discourse analysis developed by Gee, (2005, 2011) was based on his concept of discourse models which represent theories, storylines, images and explanatory frameworks that individuals hold, often unconsciously, and use to make sense of the world and their experiences within it. The discourse analysis undertaken in this study is specifically linked to the research question: how are blogs used to address issues of representation within the mainstream media? This is included in the questionnaire. The scope of the discourse analysis has been narrowed to a small selection of blogs where participants indicated on the questionnaire that they created posts in response to stories about African Caribbean people in the mainstream media and where these posts were discussed during interview. Furthermore, due to ethical issues relating to privacy, extracts have only been included where consent was given by participants for their use to over-ride the anonymity practiced elsewhere in chapters four and five of the thesis. Whilst discourse analysis accounts for a minor component of the qualitative analysis, it is the view of the author that the extracts, interwoven with the participant's comments during interview add continuity and context to the chapter.

The researcher has employed a range of verification strategies throughout the course of the study to ensure the reliability, validity and rigour of this research project. Such strategies include but are not be limited to: methodological coherence between the research questions and the various components of the research methods; collecting and analysing data concurrently, thinking theoretically, ensuring that as new ideas emerge they are verified in data already collected; and in theory development, ensuring that theory is developed both as an outcome of the research process and as a template for further development of the theory. Validation is 'the process(es) through which we make claims for and evaluate the "trustworthiness" of reported observations, interpretations and generalisations' (Mishler, 1990:419). Based on this definition, validation is embedded within the research process, rather than functioning as a separate assessment performed at the end of a research project. The use of verification strategies during the research process is a more effective way of ensuring reliability and validity of qualitative research than post-hoc evaluation. Standards applied at the end of a research project function more as an evaluation of quality and thus cannot direct the research as it is being conducted. Conversely, verification strategies that are integrated into the research process can help identify and correct errors and prevent corruption of the analysis. These strategies place responsibility on the researcher to be proactive in systematically checking data, assessing, monitoring and confirming modes of

analysis and interpretation. Such strategies also ensure the rigour of a research project is maintained and are effective for studies involving critical theory, ‘in which the investigator’s experience becomes part of data and which perceive reality as dynamic and changing’ (Morse *et al*, 2002:19). Harding (2013) argues that reflexivity is an important tool for safeguarding the validity of qualitative research where subjective decisions are taken during data analysis. Decisions can be explained through the use of methodological memos that explain how a participant’s words have been interpreted and included/excluded from certain codes and categories. The use of a mixed methods approach in this study also ensures that findings can be verified through the use of triangulation.

#### **5.4 How blogging informs the research process**

To place my blogging experience into an historical context, it is worth noting that prior to becoming a blogger I have worked as a professional journalist since 2002 and hold a bachelor’s degree in journalism studies. I have also been teaching journalism at undergraduate level since 2008. During 2008 I made the transition from practising journalism as editor of an online news site, to teaching journalism at university after completing a postgraduate certificate in teaching in higher education. In that same year I also became involved in research practice after taking on a role as a freelance research assistant at a London university. However, I was not ready to sever my ties with journalism altogether since I felt that being a journalist both informed and enhanced my teaching practice. Subsequently I established a journalism training course and combined this with a news website, which functioned as a platform for individuals to submit journalistic articles. I have managed this venture on a part-time basis concurrent with my freelance research role and part-time lecturing role, running courses each year in London and managing up to 30 contributors submitting content to the site. I also wrote news stories and features for the site in addition to performing an editorial role.

I created my first blog in the latter part of 2008 using Wordpress to develop a combined blog and personal website which was focused around my professional interests. In the beginning my blogs were commentaries on social issues, mainly about race, and more in keeping with the journalistic articles I formerly wrote, which were intensively researched and constructed using journalist conventions. By 2010, I had adopted a personalised narrative, sharing my experience of tackling weight issues. My blog posts were still heavily supported by research, mainly scientific studies as I regarded my blog as a source of trusted information as opposed

to a collection of personal musings. By 2011, when my profile as an emerging academic took on greater significance and my ICT skills had become fairly advanced, I re-designed my personal website restricting its content to posts about doctoral studies, higher education and academia. I then established a second lifestyle blog dedicated to health and wellbeing. I also created a Facebook page and linked it to my lifestyle blog and joined community forums to interact with other bloggers. During that same year I noticed that there was no single place to locate other African Caribbean bloggers in the UK unlike the US, which has several bloggers' networks for African Americans. Subsequently I established an online directory for African Caribbean bloggers in the UK, called Black Bloggers UK Network.

I began thinking seriously about undertaking doctoral research in the latter part of 2009 after deciding to focus my career on teaching and research full-time; and after working as a freelance research assistant for 18 months on a project as the research interviewer. I felt that without a doctorate there would little prospect of making the transition to a full-time academic. My original research proposal that I submitted to the University of Salford, earning me a full-time studentship, was focused on blogging as an alternative form of journalism. I subsequently started my PhD research project in October 2010. However, a year later in October 2011 after passing my interim assessment, I decided to explore a useful suggestion by one of the internal examiners who thought that a broader focus on blogging outside a journalistic framework might make for a more interesting project. I took a long hard look at the work I had done thus far; both reflecting on and re-examining my original objectives. After reviewing further literature on blogging I decided to take that valuable piece of advice and re-structured my project around blogging as a social and cultural practice. By the spring of 2012 I had become more focused, having greater clarity of thought and the ability to articulate ideas more succinctly.

Being an active member of the blogging community whilst simultaneously researching bloggers has deepened my understanding of certain aspects of blogging practice that could only be gleaned through lived experience. There are three dimensions of blogging that greatly informed my research practice that I will discuss in this section:

- Creating and managing blogs
- Reflecting on blogging experience
- Interacting with other bloggers

One of the research questions that direct this study relates to how African Caribbean people use blogs. Studies show that the majority of blogs are used as a means of personal expression (Herring *et al* 2004; Fox & Lenhart, 2006; Papacharissi, 2007; Technorati, 2011). However, the term ‘personal expression’ could have varied meanings based on how participants interpret the word ‘personal’. For example, *personal* could imply sharing intimate thoughts and feelings based on day-to-day experiences, or by contrast offering informed commentary on social issues from a personal perspective—but these are both quite different uses. However, through the process of creating and managing a blog I was able to experience how bloggers make choices about the use of blogs at the stage of their creation. These choices could be linked to a number of factors such as the level of ICT knowledge and skills, the present or past occupation of the blogger or other hobbies and pastimes. This informed the research process by raising awareness of the need to explore other areas of the bloggers’ lives to gain more meaningful information about their use of blogs, rather than merely asking the straightforward question: ‘how do you use your blog?’ It raised my awareness that the study needed to inform not just *how* African Caribbean people use blogs but *why* they use blogs in the way they do and *what* factors influence their use of blogs. In evaluating my own experience I was able to determine that I use my blogs as a means of offering factual information combined with personalised narratives. The choice to use my blogs in this way is influenced by my prior experience as a journalist and a desire to continue writing in a semi-journalistic way, both to maintain my skills and for enjoyment as a new pastime. Being able to fully implement my choice of blog use was also determined by my advanced ICT skills that enabled me to remediate blogging software by adapting predetermined uses to suit my specific needs. Creating and managing my blogs enabled me to link my personal exploration into the blogging world with analytical interpretation of blogging practice. This informed my research methodology, directing me to adopt a qualitative interpretive approach that could uncover the complexities of blogging practice. Managing the blog and updating it as often as time allowed also enabled me to experience some of psychological dimensions of blogging. For example, my lifestyle blog documents my journey to adopt a healthier lifestyle. On occasions when I updated my blog to report progress in losing weight, I experienced a sense of excitement during the process of constructing my blog posts and in presenting my progress in pictures. I gained further emotional highs when visitors to my blogs posted comments on articles to encourage and support me in my endeavours, or to share their own successes. Therefore managing my blogs informed my understanding of the psychological and

emotional elements that influence the gratification obtained from blogs. However, it also alerted me to the need during interviews to explore gratifications by uncovering information about particular events in the bloggers' lives that they may have shared on their blogs and also in relation to examining the nature and frequency of feedback received.

In virtual ethnography and cyberethnography, as both participant and observer the researcher becomes part of the culture that she wishes to investigate. As a blogger managing two blogs, I was part of the blogging community and blogging culture that I sought to investigate in my research project. This was invaluable in terms of informing the research process through being able to verify interpretations of the quantitative element of the study, namely the questionnaire, and in terms of verifying interpretations of the qualitative elements of the study: the interviews and the discourse analysis. According to Hannabuss (2000) being part of the research process is when a researcher sets out to investigate something and includes themselves as an actor, incorporating the concept of reflection in practice. He argues that this type of research is both autobiographical and ethnographical because the research contains systematically gathered evidence such as interviews, but also contains reflections and self-revelations, which is a consequence of being an actor in the research process. As this study utilises virtual ethnography and cyberethnography through blogging while studying African Caribbean bloggers; this places me in the position of co-participant, an actor in the research process. Therefore, self-reflection and self-revelation become necessary dimensions of the research gathering process.

A major benefit of self-reflection is in being able to make a meaningful connection between theory and practice and maintaining a reflective journal is the beginning of analysis (Watt, 2007). Riley-Douchet & Wilson (1997) devised a three-step-process for maintaining a reflective journal. Step one involves critical appraisal, step two involves peer group discussion and step three involves self-awareness to self-evaluation. This process was designed for nursing students, which is why step two involves a peer discussion. However, since my intended use was to reflect on my blogging experience, I adapted this method by skipping step two. I will now focus on critical appraisal and self-awareness to self-evaluation explaining first the processes involved and how I used this as part of my research process. Critical appraisal in reflective writing involves including 'descriptions, emotional reactions and cathartic reflections' of experiences (Riley-Douchet and Wilson, 1997:966). In maintaining a journal of my blogging experience I would first describe the process I was reflecting on; for example, in trying to conceive of a worthy topic on which to construct a



blog post. I would then document my emotions towards this process, such as the frustration in being unable to find a suitable topic, or the elation in finding a worthy topic accidentally by stumbling across new information related to the topic of my blog. Bloggers often describe the process of blogging in terms of ‘getting things off their chest’. This is the essence of cathartic reflection, that somehow emotional baggage has been offloaded through the process of writing an entry in a reflective journal. Self-awareness to self-evaluation in Riley-Douchet and Wilson’s (1997) three-step-process involved nursing students documenting unique aspects of learning as a result of the peer group discussion. I adapted this to ending a reflective journal entry by jotting down any unique insights into blogging practice or the research process gained as a result of composing the journal entry. The following extracts provide an example of my adapted self-awareness to self-evaluation by showing how the process of reflection allowed me to gain unique insights into blogging practice that are documented in the ‘insights’ added to the end of the journal entry. The insights demonstrate the usefulness of the self-awareness to self-evaluation process in documenting at the time of composing the journal entry the specific ways that reflection has informed the research process. There is also a dual function as reflection in this context is not just undertaken as a means of considering the subjectivity within ethnographic research, but also serves a broader purpose in terms of the immediacy of interpreting the reflection in relation to the research questions.

#### Reflective Journal – August 15 2011

I am so hyped up as a result of the high level of activity and new discoveries made during the course of this week. Firstly I discovered a virtual community for black women which celebrates afro textured hair. It is amazing; it has thousands of members around the world and is like a collaborative online resource for exchanging tips, sharing inner thoughts and feelings associated with the politics involved of wearing afro hair natural, compliments, gripes, photo galleries and videos. I joined immediately and have been amazed at the warmth and friendship shown towards me by women who I have only just met in cyberspace. There are groups that you can join or create – I joined one for British naturals. It has taken me two days to create a decent profile page with links to my blog, Facebook page and Twitter account and it has already sent users to my blog. I had a desire to interact with women in my own age group – which is easy to do as you can choose to display your age on your profile. I then found myself in discussions about the challenges of growing afro textured hair when you are over forty.

This prompted me to do some research that resulted in a blog post asking the question as to whether black women over 40 can grow afro textured hair. The results have been awesome. I had 40 comments in one day – all positive including lots of advice and as a result I started my own group – Forty Plus Naturals. I now have responsibility for creating spaces for meaningful discussions and have created a facility for women to send in photos of themselves to be featured in a gallery. This has proved very popular and the photos keep coming in! Also created a gallery of 40+ celebrities on the suggestion of one of the members and this has been a source of inspiration for us all, as well as some ideas for new hairstyles! I have also seen comments on my Facebook page related to both my blog post and the group and this has taken my blogging to new heights. Some concerns – I have spent a whole week involved in activities related to the group, adding new blog posts and interacting with other group members – this may impede on other aspects of my research project – such as my literature review. But hey this *is* research and very valuable at that – I might never have gained knowledge of this group or the value of virtual communities for bloggers if I hadn't stumbled across it during the course of my blogging!

### Insights

Joining a virtual community related to the topic of your blog adds another dimension to blogging practice by linking bloggers to others with shared interests, by uncovering new information that can inspire new blog posts and through interaction with other bloggers. Especially links to the emotional element of blogging, not just by sharing thoughts and feelings with others and making friends but through increased visits to blogs through greater exposure provided from virtual community membership that can result in increased feedback. Links to gratifications from blogging and also perceptions of social and political impact. For example, I felt that starting the group Forty Plus Naturals played an important role in providing a forum for older women to discuss issues relevant to their age group, encouraged friendships and created visibility for older women; i.e. – most of the natural hair models featured in the media are *young* women. Having the 40+ galleries also helped to promote self-confidence and self-esteem amongst the members. Must make note to explore these areas in questionnaire and/or during interviews. Important!!!

The above reflective journal entry demonstrates just how important interaction with other bloggers has been to the research process as part of the virtual ethnography/cyberethnography methods and through the process of reflection. Interaction with other bloggers is a crucial aspect of blogging practice since part of the attraction of blogging is not being isolated but being part of a public sphere. The conception of the public sphere as a realm of social life where public opinion is formed (Habermas, Lennox & Lennox, 1974) has frequently been applied to the blogosphere (Baoill, 2004; Castells, 2008; Reese *et al*, 2007). In the context of this study within the framework of alternative media, the blogosphere functions as an alternative public space where ideas are circulated and opinions are formed. Interacting with bloggers during the process of blogging informed all of the research questions through lived experience, through the process of being an insider and actor in the research process. Interaction with other bloggers took many forms and I became aware through the process of blogging that there are certain tools available that can facilitate interaction. The following list includes some of the tools I used but is not exhaustive of all the available tools to facilitate interaction:

- Linking the blog to a Facebook page or other social networking site
- Linking the blog to Twitter
- Joining blog communities such as Networked Blogs and Bloglovin
- Using apps on Facebook and other social networking sites to add blog posts
- Displaying blog group badges on your blog
- Joining topic-based blogging communities
- Copying your blog posts onto your profile page within blogging communities
- Posting comments on other blogs
- Inviting people to be guest bloggers on your blog
- Being a guest blogger on other blogs
- Constructing blogs around current issues covered in the mainstream media
- Critiquing articles in the mainstream media
- Posting links to your blog posts in forums

The above list highlights the different types of activities that can promote interaction; some of these are activities such as linking the blog to Facebook and Twitter are one-time tasks which are then repeated as an automated process requiring only a small amount of effort. However, other tasks such as copying posts into profile pages within blogging communities and guest-blogging on other people's blogs require greater effort and more time. The decision whether to engage in some of these tasks may therefore be dependent on the satisfaction derived and links into gratifications from blogging. Thus, if constant feedback as a form of interaction

with other bloggers provides high levels of satisfaction then it is more likely that greater efforts will be made in utilising tools that promote interaction.

Despite the many benefits of virtual ethnography, cyberethnography and autobiographical ethnography; blogging whilst simultaneously researching bloggers did pose some challenges and revealed the complex layers of maintaining dual roles within the research process. Part of this related to the feeling of leading a double life forcing me to question the boundaries between researcher and participant or lack thereof. Blogging is a pastime I enjoy and engaged in before I embarked on the research project; but once the project commenced, being a blogger took on a new dimension. It was not just a casual pastime or means of sharing my expertise but also became a means to an end in terms of gathering research information. It forced me to examine ethical issues such as whether my motivations for engaging in certain blogging activities were fuelled by a natural interest and enjoyment of the activity or through experimentation specifically to inform my research. If I felt that I was tempted to perform an activity just to inform my research then the choice was to opt out as I reasoned that this was not ‘natural’ behaviour. But then that prompted the question: to what degree does any blogger engage in a particular activity to learn the outcome? These concerns were greatly reduced and addressed through the use of my reflective journal as these worries did not surface until several months after the research project began. Looking back at entries in my reflective journal demonstrated that before I was conscious of the link between my research objectives and my blogging activities and believed I was blogging ‘naturally’ I had gained valuable insights that negated the need for any ‘experimental’ blogging. Engaging in virtual ethnography has to be done with an understanding of its limitations in that ‘our accounts [are] based on strategic relevance to particular research questions rather than faithful representations of objective realities,’ (Hine, 2004: para. 9).

This section has sought to introduce transparency into the research process by explaining in some detail exactly how research data was gathered using virtual ethnography, cyberethnography and autobiographical ethnography through the process of blogging whilst researching African Caribbean bloggers in the UK. This has been achieved by providing a historical context to the research project in terms of my journalistic background, my history of blogging and the background to the research project itself. In this section I have documented how my blogging experience informed the research process primarily through creating and managing blogs, reflecting on blogging experience and interacting with other bloggers. I have also shared some of the challenges posed by using virtual ethnography and

cyberethnography as research methods during the process of blogging whilst simultaneously conducting research, and have acknowledged some of the limitations of this approach. As an African Caribbean woman with five years' experience of blogging I have perspectives and insights that are relevant to the research questions that I believe are of value and importance to this study. However, in order to separate my voice from those of the other bloggers that are centred and privileged in chapters six and seven as CRT praxis, I have incorporated my personal reflections on blogging in chapter eight using a fusion of critical ethnography and autoethnography. These reflections follow the same areas of inquiry covered in the interviews with participants but are presented through the constructed narratives of multiple others in order to expose intersectional experiences of difference.

## Chapter 6: Preliminary Findings from the Questionnaire

This chapter reports the findings of the online questionnaire, the purpose of which is to gather demographic information on the participants and gain insights into their blogging practices that serve as a foundation for qualitative inquiry through in-depth interviews.

### 6.1 The sample

As stated in chapter two, participants for this research project were predominantly recruited from an online network of African Caribbean bloggers in the UK established by the author. Invitations to participate in the study were first sent by email to 40 members of the network in April 2012. The main criteria for selection were that individuals must have been blogging for at least six months and have posted entries on their blogs within the last three months. A further ten invitations were sent by email to bloggers who were recommended by other bloggers. 25 of the 40 network members contacted agreed to take part in the study. Three bloggers responded directly to marketing information posted on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook and two out of the ten email recipients recommended by other bloggers agreed to participate in the research project. Two of the original 25 network members dropped out before the study commenced due to work commitments and were replaced by two other network members who were invited by email and agreed to participate. The level of response from network members invited to participate at almost two thirds is high, whilst the level of response from non-network members contacted at one fifth, is low. It is not possible to measure the response of the bloggers who responded to marketing information on social networking sites as this is a form of convenience sampling and there is no way of determining how many people viewed the marketing information. It took one month to gain the sample with informed consent. After two email invitations spaced a week apart, twelve bloggers had given written consent; the remainder gave written consent after three to four email invitations. Although 25 of the participants were connected to the author through membership of the network, there had been no prior face-to-face contact. However, the fact that the author is a fellow blogger does appear to have had a positive impact on the level of response. This is demonstrated through some of the comments made by bloggers when they agreed to participate in the study. One blogger wrote (via email) “Thank you for contacting me. I would be honoured to take part”, while another wrote: “I would be more than happy to take part in your research project.” The general attitude expressed by the participants is that they welcome the academic interest in them as a group of African Caribbean people and are

curious about what the findings reveal. The final response rate for the questionnaire and interviews is 100% as all of the 30 bloggers in the final sample completed questionnaires and gave interviews either face to face or on the telephone. Research in the area of response rates suggest that pre-notification of a study and building a relationship with potential participants are more likely to elicit a higher response rate (Johl & Renganathan 2010). The establishment of the network in 2011 followed by regular communications sent to members via newsletters, Facebook and Twitter, helped to build a relationship with the bloggers over a period of eight months. Information about the study was posted onto the network website and on Facebook and Twitter two months before email invitations were sent out. In addition, whilst the first email invitation to network members addressed the recipients as a group using the greeting 'dear fellow bloggers', further requests addressed the network members individually by their first name. Collectively, these factors may have contributed to the high response rate.

The small size of the sample means that the results cannot be generalized to the African Caribbean population in the UK. However, as a qualitative research project, the main objective of the study is to generate new levels of understanding on the motivations, perceptions and gratifications of the bloggers, derived through the meanings they attach to their activities. However, it is still possible to make useful comparisons with other studies on the demographics of the bloggers. For example, in Pole's (2005) study of African American bloggers, the average age of the participants is 37; more than half have a bachelor's degree and one fifth have a master's degree. In the sample of 30 African Caribbean bloggers in the UK, the average age of the participants is 34; for more than half (53%) the highest qualification is an undergraduate degree and for almost one third (30%) the highest qualification is at postgraduate level. There are therefore notable similarities between the participants of both groups in terms of age and educational attainment. However, gender is the point of departure since in Pole's (2005) study, 70% of the bloggers are male and 30% female but 87% of the UK African Caribbean participants are female and just 13% male. The gender divide within the UK sample reflects the gender divide within the Black Bloggers Network, which has a female membership of 81% and male membership of 19%. Due to the absence of statistical data on the numbers of bloggers in the UK, it is impossible at this stage to determine whether the gender differential is indicative of a wider gender divide among African Caribbean bloggers generally, or whether it merely reflects greater interest among African Caribbean female bloggers in joining a network. However, in terms of Pole's (2005) sample which has a majority of African American male bloggers, studies have shown that

men are more likely to author political blogs than women (Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Herring et al 2004; Schler et al 2006), and since her study is focused on political bloggers this is a likely explanation for the greater proportion of male bloggers in the sample. Aside from the gender disparity, the demographic profile of the UK African Caribbean bloggers is consistent with other studies on the blogosphere. For example, Technorati's (2011) study reveals 44% of bloggers are degree educated and roughly one third are aged between 25 and 44. In their global survey 60% of the respondents are male, consistent with an earlier study by Harp and Tremayne (2006), in which 57% of bloggers are male and 43% female. Further gender differences in the sample of UK African Caribbean bloggers are that male participants are slightly older than women with an average age of 38, compared with women at 34. This finding is consistent with a study by Schler et al (2006) which argues that the majority of older bloggers are male. Women respondents in the sample are also more likely to have an undergraduate degree (55% versus 25%) and also more likely to have a postgraduate qualification (31% versus 25%).

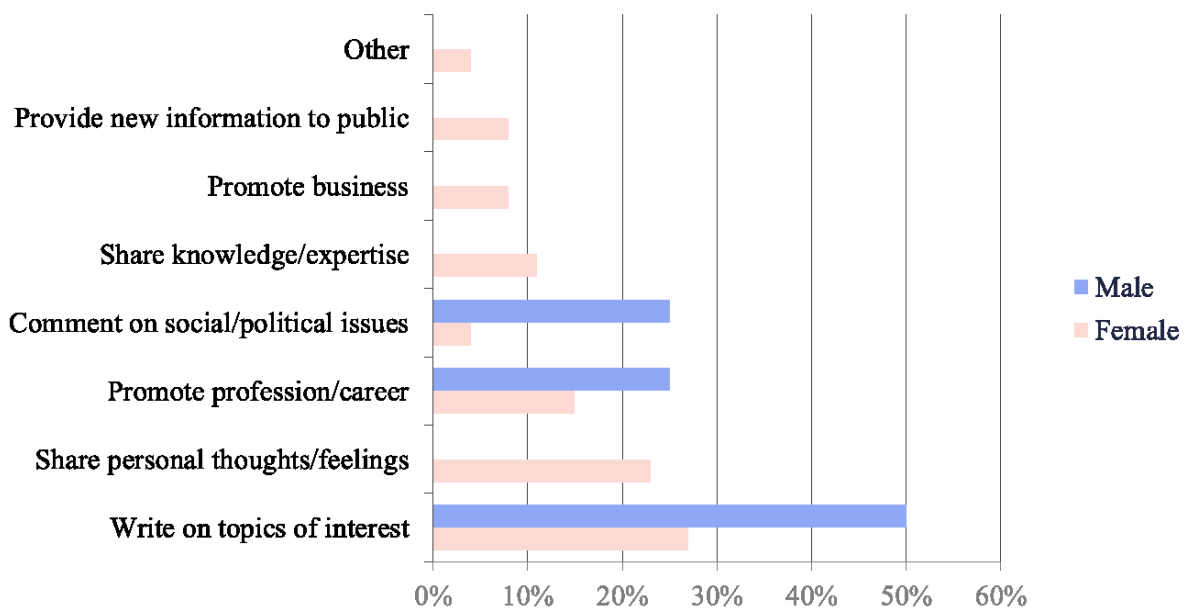
## **6:2 Blogging practice and use of blogs**

The duration as a blogger was set at a minimum of six months as a condition for inclusion in the study. However, none of the participants have been blogging for less than one year. Most participants have been blogging for one to two years (47%) and more than three years (40%) with 13% having two to three years blogging experience. This suggests that for the bloggers in the sample, blogging is not a casual or temporary pastime but a medium term activity that is sufficiently gratifying for the bloggers to undertake on an on-going basis. Although the number of males in the sample of UK African Caribbean bloggers is disproportionate to the number of women; some gender differences have been detected. For example, 75% of the male participants have been blogging for 1-2 years, whereas a greater proportion of female participants (53%) have been blogging for more than two years (2-3years 11% and over 3 years 42%). The female participants are also more frequent bloggers than the male respondents. For example, 100% of the male participants blog at least once a month, compared with 46% of females who blog at least once a week and 8% who blog at least once a fortnight. Although it is not possible to generalize the findings to the wider African Caribbean blogging community in the UK given the small size of the sample and gender disproportionality; these findings have at least highlighted the need for further research in this area.



Nearly one third of the participants (30%) describe the primary use of their blog to write about topics of interest. This is the most popular use both for male and female bloggers. However, whilst 50% of the male participants use their blogs for this purpose, only 27% of female respondents cited this as the primary use of their blog. The other main use of blogs for the male participants is to promote their profession/career (25%) or to comment on social/political issues (25%). However, for the female respondents, the second most popular use of their blogs is to record/share personal thoughts and feelings (23%). None of the male participants said that they use their blog to record/share personal thoughts and feelings, whilst only 4% of the female participants use their blog to comment on social/political issues. These findings are consistent with other studies which show that women are more likely than men to use blogs as a tool for self-expression and less likely to be authors of political blogs (Chen, 2011; Harp & Tremayne 2006; Herring et al 2004; Schler et al 2006).

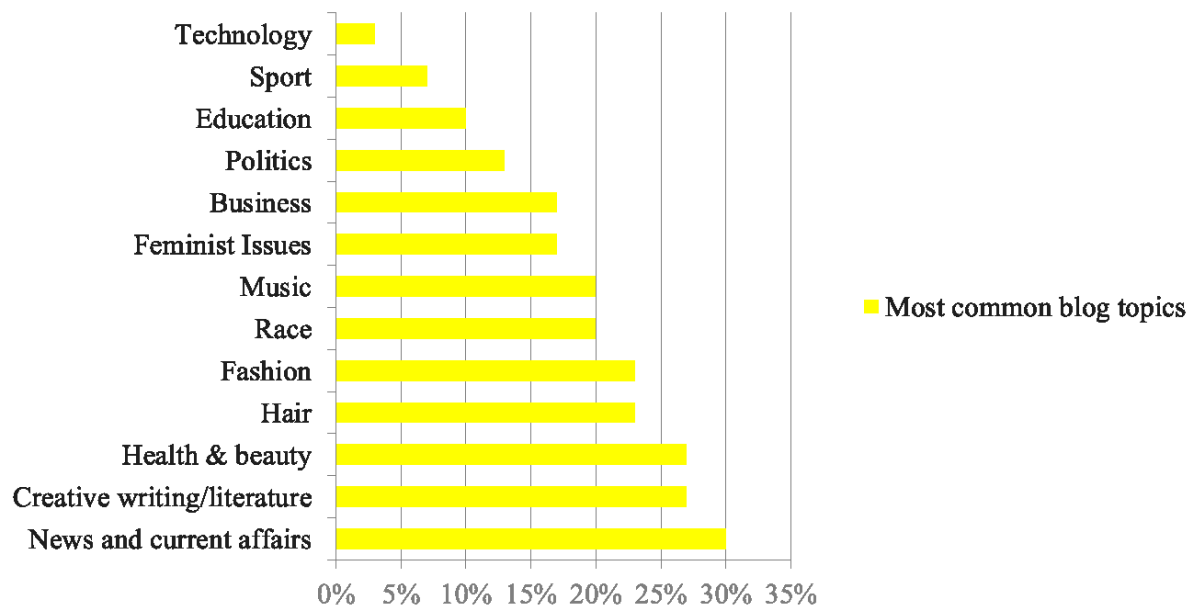
**Fig 1. Primary use of blogs by gender**



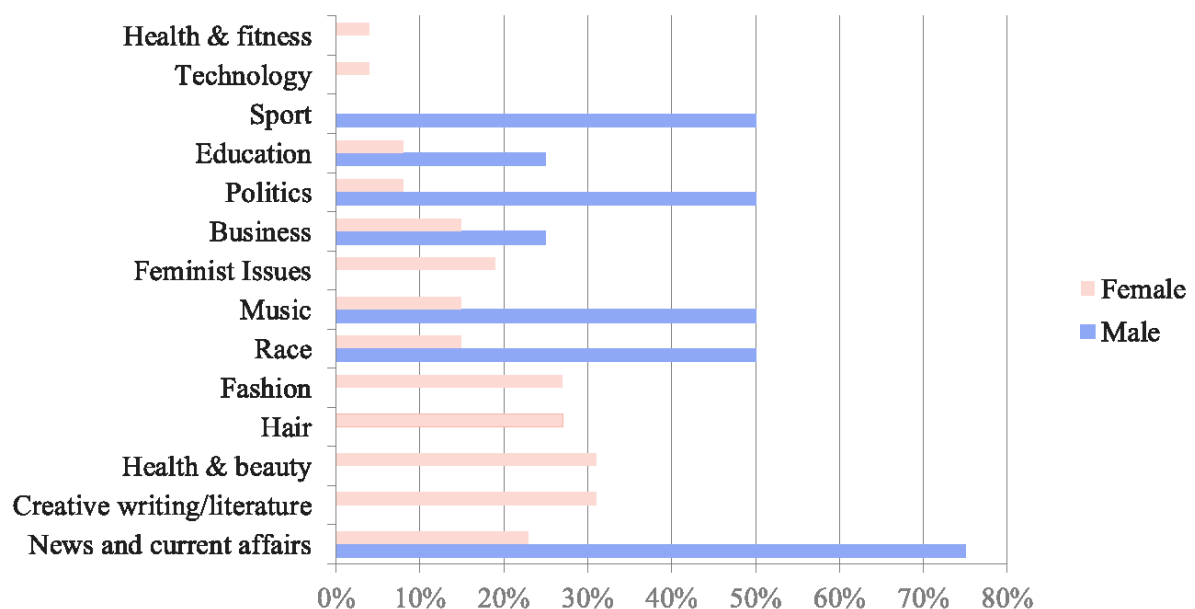
The majority of participants blog on multiple topics (67% versus 33%); however, women are more likely than men to blog about more than one topic (69% of women compared with 50% of men). The most common topic among male and female participants collectively is news and current affairs. However, a higher percentage of male participants (75%) than female participants (23%) selected this category. None of the respondents maintain blogs dedicated to politics but write about politics alongside other topics. Of notable interest is that 75% of

the participants who said they blog about politics also blog about race. This suggests that race is perceived as a political issue by the participants.

**Fig 2. Most common blog topics**



**Fig 3. Most common blog topics by gender**



Male respondents are more likely than female respondents to select both politics and race as topics that they regularly blog about and more likely to blog about music and sport. Women participants are more likely to blog about creative writing and literature, health and beauty, hair and fashion. Taken at face value, the questionnaire suggests that politics, widely

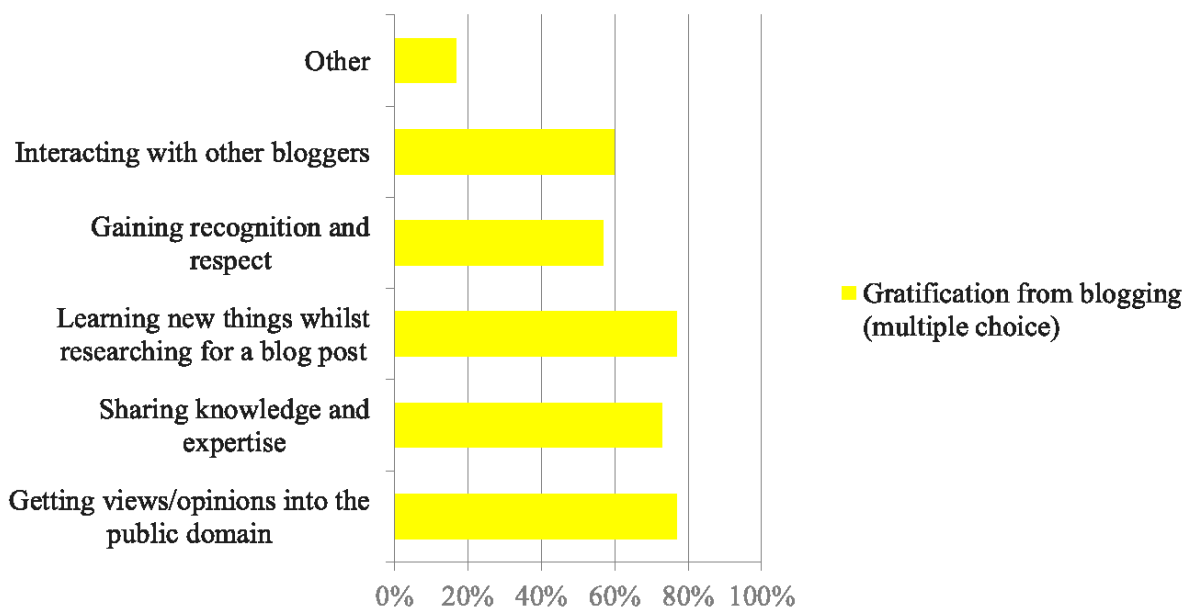
regarded as a 'serious' issue (Gregg, 2006; Herring *et al* 2004; Saleh, 2010), is not of major importance to the female bloggers in the sample who, based on their responses are more interested in feminine pursuits such as hair, health and beauty and fashion. However, as highlighted in chapter one, politics is often interpreted and discussed in the media in narrow terms, relating principally to party politics. But a growing body of research points towards more personalised and individual engagement with everyday issues enacted through discursive practices on the internet (Breindl, 2010; Shaw, 2011). Furthermore, it has been argued that black women bloggers use their blogs to challenge dominant discourses using personal narratives (Steele, 2011). Whether this is the case and to what extent this is true of the sample, can only be gleaned through qualitative inquiry, hence that for this study, in-depth interviews have been conducted with all of the participants to gain deeper understandings not revealed through the questionnaire. Discourse analysis is also being undertaken as an additional qualitative technique to investigate the social, cultural and political meanings of the language used in the blogs.

The fact that race is not a major topic of interest among the sample of African Caribbean bloggers may be somewhat surprising at first glance. However, this is consistent with the findings of Pole's (2005) study on African American bloggers which suggests that black bloggers write on a variety of topics and do not necessarily focus solely on issues of race. However, Pole suggests that while black bloggers may cover mainstream issues, they often write from the perspective that emphasises how issues affect black people. A question has been included in the survey specifically to explore whether blogs are used by African Caribbean people to address issues of racial representation in the mainstream media. It asks: "Have you ever published a post on your blog in response to something you read about African Caribbean people?" The majority of participants (87%) answered yes to this question. Furthermore this response is consistent across gender with 75% of males and 77% of females answering in the affirmative. The questionnaire has established that writing about topics of interest is the main reason for blogging among the participants, and that news and current affairs is the category most covered by the bloggers. This suggests that when African Caribbean people appear in the mainstream media, this motivates bloggers in the sample to construct a post on the topic. However, they may not perceive this as writing about 'race' but merely writing on a current issue in the media that happens to be of interest and that happens to be about African Caribbean people. This question is explored further during the interviews and will be discussed in more detail in chapter five.

### 6.3 Gratification from blogging

Two questions are included in the survey with a focus on gratification from blogging. Participants were asked to select activities that they find satisfying from a range of options associated with blogging. The first question allows participants to select more than one answer and the second question allows only one selection from the same range of activities. For the multiple choice question, the activities selected most often by male and female participants collectively are *getting views/opinions into the public domain* and *learning new things whilst gathering information for a blog post*. Both options were selected by 77% of the participants.

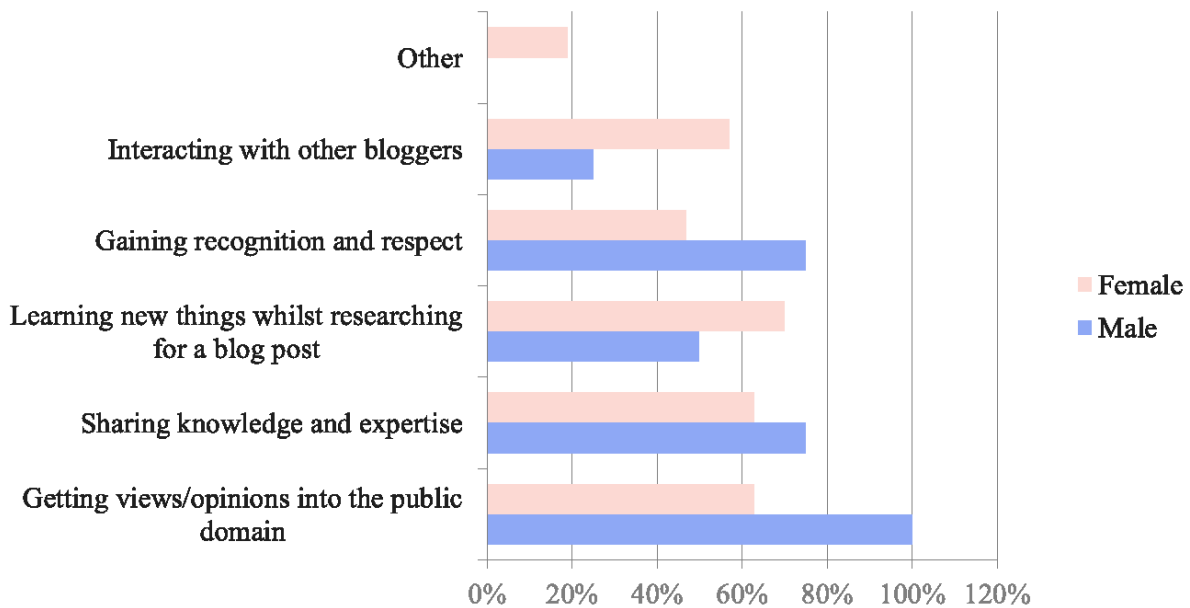
**Fig 4. Gratification from blogging (multiple choice)**



When gender is taken into account, *getting views/opinions into the public domain* was selected by 100% of male respondents and 63% of female respondents. The joint most popular option, *learning new things whilst gathering information for a blog post* was selected by 70% of female respondents compared with 50% of male respondents. Another marked gender differential relates to the option *interacting with other bloggers*. This activity was selected by 57% of female participants compared with 25% of male participants. Male participants are more likely to select *gaining recognition and respect* (75%) as a gratification from blogging than women (47%). This suggests that whilst both male and female participants are motivated to blog by the opportunity it affords to have a voice in the media; for the female respondents, gratification is linked to the process of gathering information and

gaining knowledge. The male participants appear to be motivated to blog to a greater extent by the recognition and respect that they perceive is gained through public exposure. Furthermore, the fact that the majority of female participants selected *interacting with other bloggers* as a gratifying experience, suggests that a sense of community is of greater importance to them than being popular.

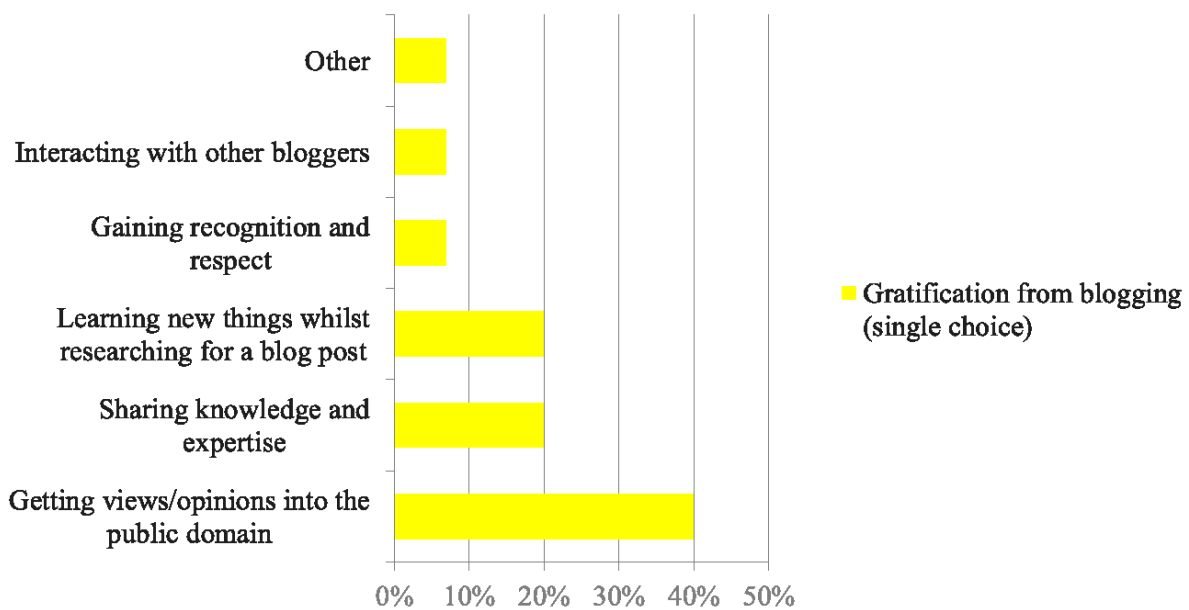
**Fig.5 Gratification from blogging (multiple choice) by gender**



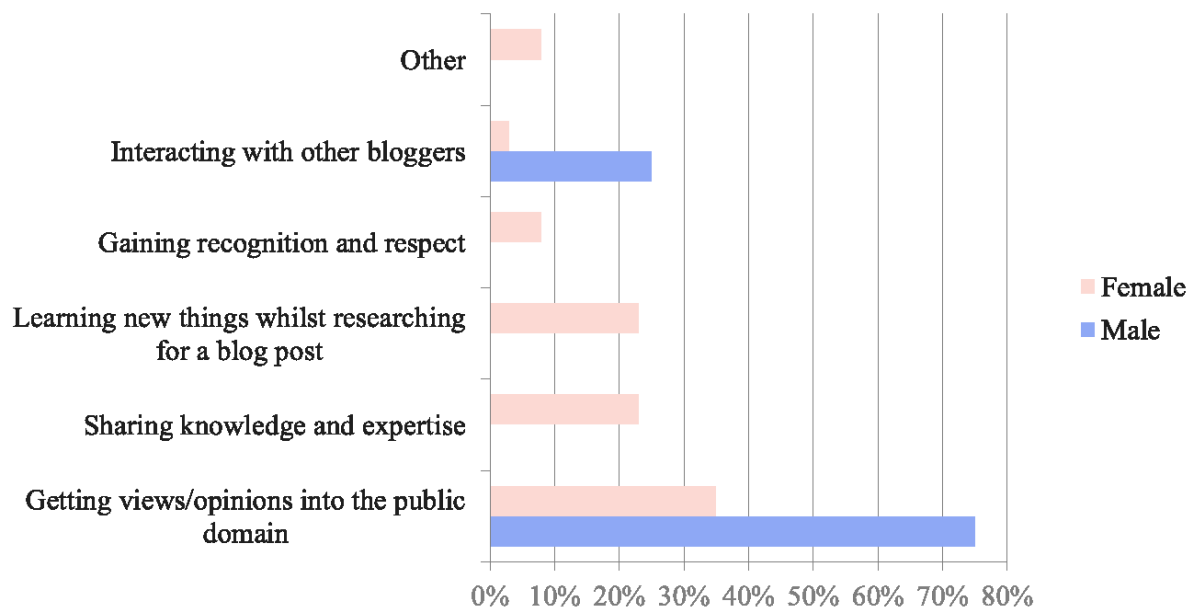
The responses to the single choice question to the same set of options have produced slightly different responses to the above answers. When given a single option, *getting views/opinions into the public domain* is still the most gratifying activity collectively among the male and female respondents. However, the percentage of participants selecting this option has reduced significantly from 77% to 40%. As with the multiple choice question, more males (75%) than females (35%) selected this option, with a much lower proportion of females identifying this activity as the primary source of their gratification from blogging. Two other gratifying activities ranked high among the female participants: *sharing knowledge and expertise* and *learning new things whilst gathering information for a blog post*, are consistent with the multiple choice answers. However, *gaining recognition and respect* and *interacting with other bloggers* show a marked difference, with both of these activities declining significantly. These findings suggest that for the female participants, these two activities are additional factors that enhance gratification from blogging, while the primary factors related to their gratification lie in the production and publication of their blog posts. For the male

participants, given the small size of the sample, inconsistency in the responses is unavoidable since the available options are greater than the number of respondents. However, *getting views/opinions into the public domain* is still the most gratifying activity, selected over *gaining recognition and respect* and *sharing knowledge and expertise*, which rank high in the multiple choice answers. This suggests that these activities are additional factors that enhance gratification from blogging, while public exposure and having a voice in the media are the main motivations for blogging.

**Fig.6 Gratification from blogging (single choice)**



This questionnaire provides a necessary foundation for the research project by collating information about the sample and in identifying patterns in the blogging practices of the participants. In doing so the questionnaire functions as a torch, illuminating areas that need further in-depth exploration in order to generate clarity and understanding, and to draw nearer to answering the research questions. While the responses to the questionnaire show some consistency with the findings of other studies on blogging, as indicated in this chapter; without deeper probing to glean further information from the participants, questions remain unanswered and stories remain untold. Previous qualitative research on blogs has revealed links between the motivations and gratifications of elite bloggers (Ekdale et al, 2010) and everyday bloggers (Nardi et al 2004). This study takes a similar approach in employing additional qualitative research methods to gain a deeper understanding on motivation, gratification and blogging practices.

**Fig.7 Gratification from blogging by gender (single choice)**

#### 6.4 Conclusion

The data collected from the questionnaire suggests that the demographics of the African Caribbean bloggers in the study are not unlike the ‘average’ blogger as revealed in research on bloggers over the last decade. They are well-educated people in their thirties, the majority (53%) of whom have an undergraduate degree. Blogging is a long-term activity, with the majority (53%) of the participants having more than two years’ blogging experience. Most of the participants do not focus on a single topic but write on a variety of issues, mostly related to news and current affairs. Race does not appear to be a major topic of interest among the participants. However, the majority of respondents (87%) indicated a motivation for blogging in response to stories about African Caribbean people in the mainstream media. When this finding is linked to the main motivation for blogging: to write about topics of interest with news and current affairs being the most popular; a potential theory emerges. A possible explanation is that issues relating to African Caribbean people covered in the mainstream are perceived by the bloggers as topical issues rather than matters of race. Whilst race may in fact be covered by many of the bloggers it is within the context of current affairs. The bloggers may not perceive themselves as writing about racial matters but writing on topical issues in the media that happen to be focused on African Caribbean people. The majority of male and female bloggers are motivated to blog by the opportunity it affords to have a voice in the

public domain. However, for the male participants gratification is linked to gaining recognition and respect; whilst for the female participants it is linked to social interaction and a sense of community.

The questionnaire plays an important role within this study by signposting areas for further exploration using qualitative techniques. It scratches the surface of inquiry in informing what the bloggers do but not why or how they do it and crucially, not in their own words. However, the following two chapters represent the testimonies of the participants, the centring and privileging of their voices in this study in a powerful act of storytelling through which the new knowledge to emerge from this study is primarily derived.



## Chapter 7: Motivation and Gratification

‘At the end of the day everybody has a right to a voice...for me it’s about being able to say this is what I think about this matter.’ Beverley (32, social commentary)

This chapter comprises the constructed narratives of the bloggers in the study and is based on CRT both from a theoretical standpoint and as praxis, representing the centring of the Black voice and Black experience (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Hylton, 2012) that is a fundamental element of this approach. Furthermore, in adopting the technique of participatory witnessing (Taylor, 1998) during the interview process, this chapter also represents the testimonies of the participants as a strategy for facilitating self-representation. The principle objective of this chapter is to construct new knowledge and generate new levels of understanding based on the perspectives of the study participants. The data has been carefully presented to avoid deviating from this approach and in doing so; the author has made reference to theories that link specifically to the themes that have emerged and prioritises those which take account of race and gender. This chapter links directly to the first two research questions: what are the motivations for blogging and what gratifications are obtained from authoring blogs? While these questions have been partially answered through the questionnaire, as reported in the previous chapter; the interviews aim to add depth and context, whilst corroborating the preliminary findings. Thematic data analysis has been used to analyse the interviews by examining commonality, differences and relationships, using an inductive approach to identify key themes emerging from the data, as outlined by Harding (2013), LeCompte (2000) and Thomas (2006). The interviews were transcribed and summarised, apriori codes were created to reflect categories linked to the research questions and empirical codes created to reflect commonalities, differences and relationships not previously considered that emerged from the data. Conceptual themes were then identified and analysed. As explained in section 4.3, for the purpose of maintaining anonymity the bloggers’ real names have been replaced with pseudonyms. To enable identification of bloggers throughout chapters four and five, they are referenced by name, age and the topic (s) they write about.

### 7.1 Motivation

Previous studies have found that bloggers are motivated both by intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Nardi et al, 2004) and that motivation for blogging is strongly linked to the gratification from authoring blogs (Lieu et al, 2007). The findings of this study reveal interconnectedness between motivation and gratification and clear indications that the bloggers in this study are

motivated by a combination of factors that are both intrinsic and extrinsic. Whilst these findings are consistent with other studies, what is unique to the African Caribbean bloggers who feature in this research project are the motivations linked to their identity and life experiences as a visible ethnic group in British society. These have been conceptualised within the emerging themes of voice, visibility and empowerment.

### **7.1.1 Voice and visibility**

Being heard in the public sphere is a strong motivation for blogging expressed by a large number of participants, as exemplified in the epigraph by a Beverley (32, social commentary). The desire to have a voice in the media is for some of the bloggers an intrinsic motivation linked to a love of writing and of sharing views, perspectives and experiences with an audience. As Lilian (32, Lifestyle) explains: ‘The blog keeps me writing because I always wanted to be a creative writer; creative and feature writing.’ Odera (27, Fashion) describes her main motivation for blogging in similar terms: ‘I’ve always loved writing and journalism and I liked “diarising” and a way of having my thoughts out to a public media.’ She gained professional skills in journalism at university and the blog was originally intended as a platform for showcasing her journalistic skills. But over the course of time it also became a means of indulging her passion for fashion and beauty and presenting information in a personalised way that differs from traditional journalism in its performative elements:

You can put your personality into it. You put your feelings into it. It’s your platform and your forum and you can put whatever you want to put out there. But with a newspaper you get told by your editor what kind of things to write or what to say.

Emanuella (42, lifestyle) expresses similar sentiments: ‘I’ve always wanted to write...I did a bit of freelance journalism...I saw it as a way of getting my opinions out there, my thoughts, my sort of ideas.’ She previously worked as a freelance journalist for several ethnic media publications before crossing over into the blogosphere and reviewing anything that was trending, from films to books, fashion and television shows. The gratification is again linked to the performative element of blogs: ‘Covering my life, events I go to, things that reflect my experiences. If I review a beauty product I’ll talk about how I felt when I experienced it.’ These bloggers with journalistic skills and experience have chosen to depart from conventional journalistic writing in favour of informal, personalised narratives that enable them to perform to their audiences in a unique way whilst still imparting what they deem to

be valuable information. According to Matheson (2004) blogging represents a new form of writing that denotes the evolving nature of journalism, adapting from print media to the more fluid environment of the internet. The resistance to traditional journalistic conventions represents a challenge to the corporate domination of the news media, and an appropriation of an ideological space within the public sphere. For these bloggers, the blogosphere represents a discursive space that affords the opportunity to contribute their views, perspectives and opinions to the plurality of voices on the web and 'participation in a communicative act for a complex range of purposes that may be personal or public, social, political or cultural' that has become part of their everyday lives (Curran et al, 2012: 126).

Communicative experiences based on participation have also been described as performative (Curran et al, 2012) and are intrinsic as the act of performing the self is the primary motivation. One of the participants, Roberta (23, fashion, hair and beauty) alludes to this in describing her motivation for blogging: 'I just wanted to document things that I bought and wore...to document how I do certain things related to fashion and beauty.' The motivation here is clearly performative, as the blogger has constructed an identity that she seeks to present to an audience based around her appearance; how she styles her hair, adorns herself with make-up and models the clothes she purchases. Fashion and lifestyle bloggers can be seen to represent a growing cultural practice within the blogosphere that denotes a move towards metamodernism; challenging the traditional journalistic standards found in elite fashion titles adorned with thin models with perfect bodies, skin and hair that conform to the contrived commercialised standards of beauty that are unrepresentative of the average woman. By contrast, many fashion bloggers have appropriated this ideological space, elevating themselves to real-life models, flaunting clothes and accessories from high street stores. In doing so, they interweave their recommendations with 'performative narrations' capturing new audiences of 'metamodern fashion consumers' (Pederson, 2011). As Roberta (23, fashion, hair and beauty) explains: 'The thing is with fashion and beauty there's quite an element of vanity in it.' Audrey (22, hair and beauty) elaborates further on the motivation to perform within the blogosphere: 'People just want to know what your personality is and as long as that comes through people will read that post a lot more.' In this regard, the blog functions as a stage and the blogger as the actor keen to woo audiences by performing a constructed identity using personalised narratives that focus more on their experiences with products than the products themselves. But it is this style of reality blog that captures the

attention of audiences, eliciting empathy and the sense of a shared identity, of being a real woman and of being authentic.

For intrinsically motivated bloggers, blogging also represents an evolutionary step from earlier forms of interactive media made possible by the expansion of ICTs. A female blogger in her twenties explains how she became involved in blogging:

I had an online community back in the days of MSN groups and we'd share our thoughts or events and things with people, so blogging seemed like a natural progression of that.

A female fashion blogger in her twenties expresses similar sentiments, describing blogging as 'the next thing that people were doing...kind of the next thing to do.' These bloggers are well-educated people with high levels of media literacy who are at the forefront of new media take-up (OFCOM, 2008). Adrian (30, social commentary) previously used Yahoo Voices as a platform for writing before setting up his own blog: 'I've always kind of been interested in journalism anyway and it was really just that I had views and opinions that I wanted to get out.' He says that blogging offers total autonomy and control over what he writes and when he writes it, 'in whatever voice I want'. Having a blog allows him to speak to a wide audience and offer personalised perspectives on a variety of subjects. The blog provides the platform for a voice in the public sphere as a social commentator. By contrast, Beverley (32, social commentary) is already employed as a journalist. Her desire to have a voice in the media outside a professional context is 'for people to get to know me...it's supposed to be a way of people getting to know me and my work.' Blogging therefore affords her the opportunity to showcase her professional work whilst building a more fluid and intimate relationship with her audience than is possible through traditional media. The desire to have a voice in the public sphere is part of a broader motivation linked to participation, for several of the bloggers in the study. It is not borne of a desire to be an isolated voice in the public domain, but rather as one female blogger describes, being part of 'the whole blogosphere community'.

For some of the participants, the motivation to blog is driven by a complex set of extrinsic factors that are linked to issues of race and representation that fuel a desire to be seen and heard in the public domain through their own constructions of identity. Isaac (35, sports) explains his frustrations with the media as a major motivation for starting a blog:

The media wants to cover what they want to cover about a certain race, portray a race as dumb or stupid or ignorant or illiterate or incapable of putting two words together or just complete criminals.

He feels that neither the mainstream media nor ethnic media is interested in covering positive stories about African Caribbean people: 'Even our own people, they are not interested.' He turned to the blogosphere as an alternative space to challenge what he perceives as negative discourses and representations of African Caribbean people: '...I'll create my own audience and I'll create my own sort of media and through that I'll build up supporters along the way. That's how I got inspired, by being marginalised.' The motivation for blogging here is clearly extrinsic and linked to a specific outcome of blogging to challenge negative representations of African Caribbean people. This represents social, cultural and political motivations enacted simultaneously. This blogger feels that people with racialised identities are subject to negative stereotyping in the media and there is little interest amongst journalists in reporting the positive activities of ordinary black men who do not fit a particular stereotype: 'Unless I'm a gangster or some sort of superstar they're still not interested in what the man on the street has to say.' His response to this exclusion which renders him invisible is to use the medium of blogging to develop his own audience who he hopes will be empathetic to his feeling of being marginalised and who he plans to cultivate as 'supporters.' This approach is radical in orientation; it is about challenging negative stereotypes of black identity and is a process of self-representation that is characteristic of alternative media practice and represents a 'new politics of representation' (Gabriel, 1998:17) Gurak & Antonijevic (2008) argue that conceptualised as communicative events rather than merely as objects, blogs function as a mechanism for identity formation through the process of constructing chronological narratives and documenting present and past experiences. This helps to fulfil a deep human need for the expression of identity. This need is even more pronounced when positive self-affirmation has to be fought for by challenging negative racial stereotypes. In this regard, blogs can be viewed as a tool of resistance against racial oppression.

The perception of being excluded from the public domain is articulated by some of the female participants, for whom voice and visibility are powerful motivations for blogging. Nancy (33, career and lifestyle) explains:

I was really fed up with what I thought was the misrepresentation of black people in the mainstream. I just felt as a mum of three, I just felt where are all the

positive role models; where is the inspiration, where is the voice really? That was the impetus for me to start.

For this female blogger, the exclusion of black mothers as positive role models and her perception of 'misrepresentation' in the mainstream media lead to a sense of invisibility and voicelessness. Later in the discussion she elaborates on how these feelings motivated her to blog: 'My initial aim was to inspire, to show that black people do more than what the mainstream likes to present.' Similar sentiments are expressed by other female participants. A female blogger in her forties said:

I'm a UK African woman. I felt very invisible and a sense of voicelessness...voiceless in a society that doesn't hear me. I guess that having the blog was part of me using my voice. That's the reason I wanted to go with it really, to have that UK African Womanist presence on the web.

It is important to note how this blogger defines her identity demographically, ethnically, culturally and socially. African Womanism is an African-centred strand of feminist ideology that rejects black feminism as an offshoot of (white) feminism and which does not regard black men as adversaries but sees them as being subject to the same oppression as black women (Hudson-Weems, 2004). Her reference to being voiceless and invisible therefore relates to her self-defined identity as an African Womanist resident in the UK. Her extrinsic motivation is self-representation and the medium of blogging allows her to negotiate and reconfigure her identity. The invisibility of black women has been raised by many feminist writers including Collins (1990) and hooks (2000), articulating the marginalisation of black women. More recently, the term intersectional invisibility has been discussed in relation to black women as individuals with multiple subordinate identities not regarded as being emblematic of women (a status reserved for white women), or of black people, a status conferred upon black men. Race and gender are the most pervasive categories that override all other aspects of identity which places black women at the bottom of a socially constructed hierarchy (Espinoza, 1994). Eibach and Purdie-Vaughns (2008: 381) define intersectional invisibility as:

The general failure to fully recognise people with intersecting identities as members of their constituent groups and 'the distortion of the intersectional persons' characteristics in order to fit them into frameworks defined by prototypes of constituent identity groups.

Intersectional invisibility can be regarded an outcome of intersectional inequality, theorized within black feminist literature which emphasises inequalities based on race, class and gender. Black feminist thought is defined as ‘theoretical interpretations of black women’s reality by those who live it’ and is based on the concept of specialized knowledge created by black women that defines ‘a standpoint of and for black women’ (Collins, 1990:22). It is rooted in the historical experiences of black women and a legacy of interlocking oppression based on race, gender and class, defined as the ‘matrix of domination’ (Collins, 1990:225). Black feminist narratives are largely based on the experience of African American women that have come to represent the normative experience of black women globally (Barriteau, 2007; Blay, 2008; Reynolds, 2010; Young, 2010). However, despite the dominance of the US within black feminist literature, black feminist standpoint theory is acknowledged as an important framework for engendering a collective consciousness and collective position from which to challenge dominant ideologies on race, class and gender (Reynolds, 2010; Young, 2010).

Black women are rendered invisible in the mainstream media as they are often excluded from everyday representations of women. Nadine (31, wedding and bridal) as a bride-to-be felt that black women were absent as brides both in print magazines and on the web and this invisibility was her main motivation for starting a blog: ‘I don’t think I saw one black model in the magazines...I would flick through pages and pages and not see one black bride to be.’ The absence of representation of particular groups within the public sphere and/or misrepresentation has been conceptualised in terms of ‘symbolic annihilation’ (Gerber, 1972) which can help to perpetuate dominant discourses and negative stereotypes of marginalised groups. Tuchman (1978) argues that symbolic annihilation of women occurs through the media’s constant exclusion, trivializing and devaluing of women, diminishing their status in society. More recently, Coleman & Yochim (2008) have explored the ‘symbolic annihilation of race’. The symbolic annihilation of black women in the mainstream media as a consequence of intersectional invisibility is not necessarily remedied in the blogosphere. As discussed in chapter two, gender inequalities in the blogosphere do exist. However, by utilising blogs as a strategy for voicing, black women are able to experience discursive power on the internet. As Grace (35, creative writing) states on the importance of blogging: ‘It’s definitely getting my voice across...just letting people hear my voice...’ Whilst the motivation for blogging often arises from perceptions of exclusion, marginalisation, invisibility and voicelessness, blogging functions as an assertive strategy and

counterhegemonic practice. Audrey (22, hair and beauty) explains how her motivation for blogging was to turn a negative experience into an opportunity:

I didn't really see any other blogs for someone who is my shade...I think having someone with dark skin who lives in the UK and giving you advice on what is out there, there's definitely a gap in the market.

Similarly, Nadine (31, wedding and bridal) has used the blogosphere to generate visibility for black brides-to-be: 'There was no-one that looked like me in those blogs...so I thought okay, I'm going to create something that fills that gap.'

Writing on the politics of identity and the oscillation of cultural borders, Anderson (2011) argues that:

The desire for an authentic identity in an otherwise fragmented world has become more apparent. A search for authenticity and a reaffirmation of cohesive identification has come to define cultural belonging.

According to Anderson, old cultural borders, used figuratively to describe processes of inclusion and exclusion are recreated through a process of oscillation that can be counterhegemonic. She cites an example of people from migrant communities in New York undergoing plastic surgery in order to accentuate their perceived ethnic facial features, rejecting whiteness and challenging European standards of beauty. The concept of the body (appearance) as a figurative border, site of cultural contestation and marker of inclusion or exclusion is a useful framework for examining the motivations of some of the female bloggers in the study who are compelled to challenge exclusionary perceptions and dominant discourses around notions of beauty. Christine (26, hair and beauty) started a blog to continue a journey of discovery that began with the dissertation for her undergraduate degree, in which she examined images of black women in Britain from the 1950s. She was seeking answers to questions central to her identity:

What is beauty and why do I feel that black women are so excluded from it? Who defines what beauty is and where do these definitions come from? Who says that myself and black women aren't?

The questions, she says prompted fear of what the answers would be and she started to question why she wore weaves (hair extensions), why she was hiding her natural (afro



textured) hair and fighting against her authentic self. She came to the conclusion that the absence of black women with natural hair in the public sphere resulted in an imitation of others. As she explains:

What came out of my dissertation was that the absence of black women with natural hair was there. We need to be seen—it's the importance of being seen. What are you supposed to identify with if you can't see yourself? I wanted to address the deeper issues behind appearance. The blogging came along as a combination of sharing what I look like and what I felt like. I felt I'm a black woman and this is really me and these are my real experiences.

Black women's hair is a political issue. There is a history of natural hair as part of the overall appearance of people of African descent being depicted in racist and derogatory terms through characters like the Golliwogg from *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwogg* (Upton, B & Upton F.C, 2012) and the character Topsy from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 2003). This and the absence of positive images of black women with natural hair in the mainstream media reinforce European standards of beauty as the norm. When black women choose to wear their hair natural they are seen as being less attractive and a whole host of meanings that may not apply are inferred upon black women. Those who choose to wear their hair in its natural condition are assumed to be radical or homosexual, whilst those who wear weaves or straighten their hair are assumed to be more conservative (Prince, 2010). For African Caribbean women dealing with these issues on their blogs, the blogosphere functions as a discursive space where consensus and hegemony are constantly challenged (Dahlberg, 2007); as an ideological platform for discursive activism (Shaw, 2011) and as a public and private space for engaging in personalised political activity (Breindl, 2010).

These extrinsic motivations for blogging linked to issues of race and representation demonstrate how some of the participants use blogs as a socially interactive medium through which racialised and gendered identities are contested, reconfigured and renegotiated. These narratives also demonstrate how African Caribbean bloggers are motivated to challenge the hegemonic power of the corporate media that through the privileging of mainstream interests results in symbolic annihilation of black communities and especially black women. The concept of voice and visibility in terms of the motivations of these participants represent a desire to harness the discursive power of the internet to facilitate self-representation and participation within the public sphere. For African Caribbean women bloggers, the

blogosphere represents a platform on which they can generate their own visibility and voice. In essence their blogs function as a form of resistance against intersectional invisibility.

### **7.1.2 Empowerment**

The dimensions of voice and visibility are linked to the third major theme to emerge from the narratives of the participants: empowerment. Empowerment refers to ‘a multi-dimensional social process’ that ‘fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities and in their society by acting on issues they define as important’ (Page & Czuba, 1999). As a motivational construct, empowerment can emanate from a sense of powerlessness, ‘an intrinsic need for self-determination’ (Cogner & Kanungo, 1988: 473) or self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). The findings from this study reveal that motivations for blogging related to empowerment are both implicit and explicit in the narratives of the participants and are extrinsic, existing as one of several motivations for engaging in blogging activities. For example, as discussed earlier in this chapter, some of the participants express a sense of being invisible and voiceless as African Caribbean people in British society. In this regard, blogs act as a medium for self-representation and a mechanism for constructing an assertive voice, generating visibility and engendering empowerment through enhanced self-efficacy. Isaac (35, sports) won an award for community work, which whilst receiving brief coverage on television was not taken up by the print media, leading to a sense of powerlessness stemming from invisibility: ‘The people I thought would have paid attention to it completely ignored me, completely ignored my achievements and things that I was doing.’ Despite sending numerous emails to news publications there were no responses, compounding the sense of exclusion and powerlessness. However, by writing about his achievements on his blog, generating interest and cultivating an audience, this increased his sense of self-efficacy. According to Cogner & Kanungo (1988) empowerment occurs when self-efficacy is increased. This is precisely how our blogger describes the outcome of his blogging: ‘I started putting my energy into people who were interested in what I was doing and from that it’s empowering.’

Psychological empowerment through blogging can emerge from feeling part of a community that has a strong collective voice leading to increased confidence and assertiveness. (Stavrositu, 2007). Women can gain psychological empowerment through blogging through a sense of community and sense of agency, defined as the perception of a ‘competent, confident and assertive voice’ (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012: 371). Previous studies suggest

that African women use the blogosphere to promote women's equality and empowerment through personal expression and social interaction (Somolu, 2007) and that the internet functions as a discursive space where marginalised groups can gain a sense of empowerment by developing successful voicing strategies (Mitra & Watts, 2002). Another extrinsic motivation for blogging to emerge from the blogger's narratives linked to self-determination and self-efficacy relate to a small number of the participants who are all women, who blog as a means of promoting a business or enterprise. Jennifer (28, business) runs a marketing agency and was motivated to start a blog 'to constantly have that voice' and 'to connect with other people.' The desire to have an assertive voice can be seen as a tool for generating a sense of authority and credibility as a business woman in a competitive marketplace. This is consistent with the findings of Stavrositu & Sundar (2012) on blogging functioning as a tool of self-empowerment for women. She also uses her blog to highlight and celebrate the status of black businesswomen who are parents: 'I talk about being a mum and being a black mother in business.'

Research suggests that small businesses find blogs effective for marketing purposes and building relationships with clients (Hill, 2005). As a marketing tool, blogging can be seen as an aspect of self-employment, therefore the motivation to blog to promote a business is also linked to the wider motivation of wanting to be self-employed. In this regard, research suggests that self-employed people experience greater levels of job satisfaction because it provides greater autonomy and affords the opportunity to utilise knowledge, skills and experience (Hundley, 2001). As Jennifer (28, business) explains: 'I look at my blog as a business...part of a wider business strategy. I like writing, I've got a background in journalism [but] it's more of a business strategy for me to be honest.' Other studies suggest that black and minority ethnic graduates are motivated to start a business by the greater level of independence, sense of achievement and self-leadership that self-employment affords. One noteworthy finding is that African Caribbeans who have the lowest levels of self-employment among ethnic minority groups have the highest aspiration levels (Hussain et al, 2008). Four of the five women business bloggers are degree-educated and it can be argued that they represent the minority of African Caribbean entrepreneurs seeking self-empowerment through self-employment.

A consistent dimension of blogging amongst the business women participants in the study linked to motivation relates to building relationships with their audiences that are less to do with the products and services and more about building an intimate level of engagement.

Michaela (44, business) acknowledges that she initially started blogging as a means of ‘free advertising’ but as time progressed ‘I started to post more things specific to me’ to ‘help people to connect with my business.’ Tina (40, hair and beauty) expresses similar sentiments: ‘The main purpose of my blog is to promote my business. We’ve managed to engage a lot with customers and I think that has helped.’ Caroline (44, arts and culture) also started a blog with the intention of using it as an online presence purely for promoting her products, but explains: ‘It was initially about business but I ended up writing about what interests me.’ Research suggests that the interactive nature of blogs affords the opportunity for an open dialogue with potential customers and the personalised style of communication helps to build trust and loyalty (Singh et al, 2008). One of the enterprising women bloggers started blogging in order to promote herself as an author to help market her eBook: ‘It helps me to engage with the audience’ and the interactive element of her blog ‘lets me know what the readers are thinking and it’s a chance for engagement.’ These narratives tend to suggest that whilst the initial motivation of the women bloggers was to promote their businesses or products, the experience of blogging produced an intense gratification that blended with a personal need for self-expression. However, this is judged by the bloggers as a strategy that serves the dual purpose of engaging audiences and potential customers whilst fulfilling the human need to share their life experiences. Norma (28, creative writing) explains that the purpose of constructing a public identity through her blog was so that her audience would see her:

As the person who writes the stories in the black fiction series and obviously the human element. The blog allows me to detail my journey because obviously I’m still up and coming, so it shows what I go through.

Michaela (44, business) who started blogging to gain ‘free advertising’ explains how she went through a journey of transformation with her blog: ‘I felt it was very impersonal...but I’m actually introducing more personal to me subjects...my work and life is all the same, it’s all integrated to a degree.’

A small number of female participants express a clear motivation for empowering others. Nadine (31, wedding and bridal) devotes part of her blog to promoting small businesses, and though not exclusively owned by black proprietors, the majority featured mostly serve black communities: ‘It’s giving them a voice, free promotion and one of my most popular posts is where I’ve listed loads of African Caribbean wedding caterers.’ She goes on to reaffirm her motivation for starting the blog ‘to change perceptions of us.’ Clearly the desire to showcase

black businesses and to counter what she perceives as negative perceptions of African Caribbean people speaks of a motivation to empower others and self. It represents a sense of community and collective responsibility. Similarly, Leona (28, Arts and culture, Africa) states that her motivation for starting a blog was ‘to showcase a lot of the creativity and innovation that either comes out of Africa or is produced by people of African descent.’ This stems from the perception that ‘there’s not much attention given to African arts and culture generally so this is one platform that I can use to do that.’ Gloria (27, Arts and culture) expresses similar concerns about the marginalisation of black creativity and how it motivated her to start blogging:

I find that some of my best ideas come out of frustration...I was interested in finding out...why it seemed that the face of design was older white men and not really women, not really any other kind of racial group...

For these women there is a strong incentive to influence the socio-political landscape by offering non-stereotypical representations of African Caribbean people in the business and creative sectors. This motivation is not only centred on empowerment but also constitutes political discourse, regardless of whether these activities are perceived by the bloggers as overtly political. Their blogs function as a discursive form of resistance to the underrepresentation of African Caribbean enterprise and creativity in the mainstream media. Here, empowerment as a motivational construct (Cogner & Kanungo, 1988) is realised through the contestation of dominant discourses that marginalise African Caribbean people through the discursive realm of the blogosphere through a process that Shaw (2011) describes as discursive activism.

The concepts of voice, visibility and empowerment are proposed as the primary motivations for blogging amongst the African Caribbean bloggers in this study. Voice and visibility operate as intersecting factors, representing a desire to be seen and heard in the public sphere. For some of the participants, these motivations are intrinsic and driven by an interest in performative writing and/or journalism. However, for several of the participants, voice and visibility as motivational factors are driven by a need to challenge negative racial stereotypes and develop their own constructions of identity. For some of the women in this study, the intersections of race and gender resulting in symbolic annihilation are strong motivations for blogging. Empowerment also represents an extrinsic motivation driven by a need for self-efficacy that operates on different levels amongst the participants. For some, the need for

self-empowerment is driven by feelings of invisibility and voicelessness as African Caribbean people in British society. For some of the women in the study empowerment is linked to a desire to promote and celebrate black businesses; and to use blogs for the dual purpose of promoting enterprise and fulfilling a need for self-expression. These findings suggest that the common link between these motivations, whether intrinsic or extrinsic is self-efficacy, which appears to be achieved through the practice of blogging.

## **7.2 Gratification**

Previous research suggests that gratification from authoring blogs is linked to factors such as emotion management, life documenting and discussion that exist within overall themes of process, content and social gratification (Sepp et al, 2007). Other studies have linked self-expression as a major gratification and social interaction to a lesser degree (Papacharissi, 2007). Most studies on bloggers place greater emphasis on uncovering motivation, (Liu, et al, 2007; Nardi et al, 2004). Whilst the few studies on bloggers of African descent have tended to place greater emphasis on their activities rather than their gratification (Pole, 2005, 2009; Moyo, 2011; Somolu, 2007; Steele, 2011). Motivation is inextricably linked with gratification. For example, the bloggers quoted earlier in this chapter motivated by the need to address experiences of exclusion, voicelessness and invisibility would not continue to blog if their efforts did not yield the desired results, or if there was no sense of fulfilment from these activities. However, this study has endeavoured through a qualitative and interpretative approach to produce a more nuanced understanding of the key factors that contribute to satisfaction from blogging. The findings reveal that having a voice in the public domain, knowledge sharing, knowledge acquisition and social interaction respectively, are the primary gratifications from blogging. These were the factors mentioned most frequently by participants as generating the greatest levels of satisfaction from blogging and are consistent with the primary gratifications that emerged from the questionnaire.

### **7.2.1 Voice**

Given the importance of voice to the participants both as an intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as highlighted earlier in this chapter, it is unsurprising that it is also the primary factor linked to gratification. However, the interviews reveal that among some of the African Caribbean bloggers in this study, gratification is linked to complex forms of cultural expression. For example, Grace (35, creative writing) confirms that what she most enjoys about blogging is:

Definitely getting my voice across, whoever cares, but I think I've got an opinion on something that I feel should be shared. It's kind of educating through humour; it's kind of getting points across with a bit of tongue-in-cheek.

Voice is explicitly expressed here, but also implicit in the blogger's statement is self-expression—giving her opinion on issues, and educating readers. Later in the discussion she reveals that her sense of gratification is directly linked to the nature of the content she posts, which she describes as:

Our experiences in Britain and being black people. I think there are things we need to know about our history and culture and instead of beating people over the head with it, which sometimes I feel like I do, letting people laugh along with it as well as learning something.

The sense of gratification is further increased through receiving positive feedback; either through comments directly on the blog or comments posted in networked media, in instances where the article has been shared on social media platforms either by the blog authors or their readers. Feedback serves to validate her approach and produce the desired outcomes: 'What I relish most is when posts get a reaction and people start talking and take it off on their own. I think that's the best reward, then it's doing what it's meant to do.' The link between voice within the context of documenting the experience of African Caribbean people and positive feedback is also expressed by Chioma (48, race, gender, and politics). Her motivation in addressing voicelessness and invisibility as an African Womanist was discussed earlier in this chapter. With regard to gratification she says:

It's very exciting for me because it's like something that I want to say. It's using my voice and saying okay, this is what's on my mind and I just want to put it out there. When people comment on it or say something it's even better...it's like people are getting it.

Christine (26, hair and beauty) expresses similar sentiments in relation to voice combined with sharing knowledge and enlightening others as major forms of gratification, increased through positive feedback:

I guess when you have thoughts and feelings you naturally want to share them. It's that ability to free them, put them out there, to have your say. I think it's

important for people to have their say and when you get a response from people who think or feel similarly it's pleasing.

These examples demonstrate the interconnectedness between motivation and gratification in relation to voice as the primary factor. Although not explicit in their narratives, it is evident that positive affirmation of the blogger's efforts to represent the interests of African Caribbean people within the blogosphere leads to increased self-efficacy. For Grace (35, creative writing) this is achieved through using humour to document Black history and the experience of African Caribbean people successfully. For Chioma (48, race, gender, and politics) positive feedback lets her know that people enjoy reading her blog and this increases her perception of being visible and having a voice within the public sphere. For Christine (26, hair and beauty) seeking to challenge negative perceptions around natural hair, positive feedback creates a sense of community: 'There's a shared sort of community there and that in itself feels like you have the power for change.' It is argued here that as a gratification, having a voice in the public sphere combined with positive feedback leads to a sense of empowerment through self-efficacy. This is particularly the case when the content is centred on issues around being black in British society and where the blog is used to channel alternative discourse as a counterhegemonic practice. It is also argued here that gratification exists on multiple levels as a blended experience that occurs through a combination of intersecting factors.

For the bloggers quoted earlier in this chapter where motivation is intrinsic and blogging represents an evolved form of journalism (Matheson, 2004) and an activity in which anyone can participate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Gant, 2007); a platform for writing is central to gratification and the act of publishing is the ultimate reward. As Julia (21, fashion) explains:

As a journalist you want your opinion to be out there...so for me writing is something that's getting my opinion out there. It may not be that I'm reaching masses of people but it's about getting my views out there...it's where I can put me out there.

Similar sentiments are expressed by Adrian (30, social commentary):

It's a nice feeling to get [the article] out into the wider world. It's nice to think that someone has stumbled across this and read my views, even though we don't have any kind of relationship or connection.



These sentiments are echoed Danielle (33, food): ‘I’ve enjoyed just having a forum to be heard. It’s nice to have a voice and I think the power of the internet is that you can have a voice.’ For Emanuelle (42, lifestyle) the opportunity to reject the journalistic convention of presumed objectivity increases the level of gratification: ‘I’m able to give my opinion on things, to be quite open. If I don’t like a product I’ll say I don’t like it and why I don’t like it. That’s something I do get quite a lot of enjoyment out of.’ She articulates what many of these bloggers find most gratifying about blogging: the lure of instant fame: ‘I like the immediacy as well. I like the fact that you can write an article and publish it within seconds and it’s up there...I quite like that as well, that’s quite enjoyable.’

### **7.2.2 Knowledge sharing**

The second major factor to emerge from the narratives of the participants as a primary gratification is knowledge sharing. This has been sub-divided into three distinct areas: experiential knowledge, professional knowledge and ‘Black knowledge’, defined here as the dissemination of information that highlights the contribution of African Caribbean people to the arts, culture, business, literature, etc. The term ‘experiential knowledge’ has been used here in reference to the theory of experiential learning as ‘the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’ (Kolb, 1984:41). A dimension of experiential knowledge that has emerged from experiential learning theory that has particular relevance to blogging is ‘conversational learning’ (Baker et al, 2002). This is based on the premise that people learn from each other to create new knowledge through the medium of conversation. Conversations are conceptualised as social experiences that generate new ways of seeing the world. The two dimensions of conversational learning involve personal knowledge, acquired through personal experiences and social knowledge that emerges from ideas generated through texts and experiences and shared in conversations. Blogs, with their interactive and participatory elements are dialogical and can therefore function as a conversational space and medium for learning and generating new knowledge. Blogs encompass both dimensions of conversational learning through individual bloggers posting content on their blogs and through the knowledge contained in the content of the post being shared within the blogosphere through links on other blogs, through sharing on social media platforms and through dissemination in oral conversations. Odera (27, fashion) explains the satisfaction she derives from sharing experiential knowledge and makes an observant distinction between professional knowledge and experiential knowledge:

For me it's not so much about expertise but experiences. When I say I share my knowledge and expertise it's more about me sharing my experiences and hoping that it will help other people who are going through the same thing.

Feedback works in combination with sharing knowledge as a blended gratification: 'I like to know the impact of my writing whether it's positive or negative...whenever I write something I like to get feedback from people'. A similar distinction between expertise and experience is made by Roberta (23, fashion, hair and beauty):

I don't necessarily see myself as having expert knowledge, more just knowledge through the experience of what I've found works for me that I feel is beneficial to share with other people. So expertise in that sense but not...scientifically proven information or stuff like that but what I find works for me personally.

Again, feedback is central to sharing knowledge in order to facilitate the flow and interchange of ideas as she explains: 'When people leave comments it's another good way of interacting so you can also share ideas'. Audrey (22, hair and beauty) is seeking to fill 'a gap' in the mainstream media created by the absence of literature about beauty products for darker skins. She finds it rewarding that she has acquired this missing knowledge and is able to share through her blog:

It's...my knowledge of what products stay the longest, what product will work with oily skin and what will work with dry skin; saying I've tested this product and it will work this way. I'm saying there's a lot of products that I know about and there's a wealth of information.

Lisa (33, social issues) is a qualified counsellor and although she no longer works in this profession uses her blog as a platform 'where I can use my knowledge in counselling to intertwine and weave with social issues and current trends.' The knowledge she imparts on her blog is self-defined as professional:

I class myself as a counsellor not confined to the counselling room. Just because I'm not counselling one-to-one does not mean I'm not a counsellor. I've got a bag of knowledge and I'm still using it in an everyday way.

In terms of gratification, she is explicit in her assertion that whilst 'it's lovely to hear the odd comment about how people like my blog...I am not looking for validation.' Gratification

emerges through the sense of accomplishment in sharing her professional counselling skills that would otherwise be ‘wasted knowledge’ that leads to feelings of ‘self-worth.’

The third distinct area to emerge from the narratives of the participants related to gratification from sharing knowledge is defined here as ‘Black knowledge’ which highlights the contribution of people of African descent to the arts, culture, literature, business and many other knowledge sectors. It is argued here that gratification is linked to the specific type of knowledge shared. Tracy (50, creative writing) works as a marketing director and authors a blog focused on books and literature. ‘All the books that I write about are black fiction, black writers, whether they’re from Africa or the USA, Europe or the continent itself.’ The purpose of the blog is to encourage and stimulate engagement with African/Caribbean literature and to promote the work of black writers. Describing her level of gratification, she explains:

I like sharing what I’ve found out with other people, I think that’s the main thing. People do tell me they enjoy it—now and then I get comments and things. It’s nice to know that people like what I have to say about XY book or be interested in the interviews.

Luther (43, social commentary) is a former professional journalist who has carved a niche within the blogosphere as a social commentator and uses his blog to ‘[show] off my knowledge and expertise on the topic of black music and popular culture but it’s also broadening it out to much wider issues relevant to the Diaspora.’ He undertakes the same level of fact-checking and research associated with professional journalism: ‘I’ll buy books to research the blogs I’m going to write so that I know that I’m talking some kind of sense.’ Artistic freedom, feedback and interaction contribute to the sense of gratification:

I actually prefer blogging now to the journalism I used to do because I have a lot more freedom, I can write about whatever I want. The other great thing about blogging is the feedback. I very rarely got feedback when I was doing print journalism but now with the blog I get online feedback.

Caroline (44, arts and culture) originally set out with the intention of using her blog to promote products but eventually found herself straying into areas of personal interest. As a graduate with a background in creative arts these interests centred on ‘African Caribbean culture’, artists and designers that she feels are not represented in the mainstream media: ‘I sought out...black art and black designers that you don’t see on the web that much, not in the

UK anyway.’ In terms of gratification, feedback and a sense of providing a useful resource are key factors:

I like the feedback when occasionally people say thanks for telling me about this artist...I’m realising the power of blogging and what it can do as a resource, not just as a business but as sharing information.

It is argued here that amongst these bloggers a specific type of gratification arises from posting content defined here as ‘Black knowledge.’ By seeking to highlight black music, culture and social issues of particular relevance to the African Diaspora; African Caribbean literature and writers and African Caribbean designers and artists, these bloggers are not only satisfying personal interests but are also aware that their actions are remedial in addressing gaps in the mainstream media. Positive feedback affirms their actions provide a useful service and leads to a sense of satisfaction.

### **7.2.3 Knowledge acquisition**

The third major gratification from blogging to emerge from the participants’ narratives relates to the acquisition of knowledge gained through the process of constructing a blog post. This must be seen as part of the cycle of experiential (Kolb, 1984) and conversational learning (Baker et al, 2002) that occurs through the process of blogging. Whilst bloggers are generating knowledge within and beyond the blogosphere that informs others, they also undertake research for particular topics that they write about. The bloggers are therefore learning and acquiring new knowledge whilst imparting that knowledge to their audiences. For some of the participants, the gratification is produced through the act of informing and educating others, whilst with other bloggers the gratification occurs through the process of learning and conducting research. Mitchell (44, news and current affairs, race) is ‘very interested in the media, in journalism and current affairs’ gets a sense of satisfaction from the research process:

Researching can be quite interesting because I think there’s an onus on you to do a little bit of homework when you write a blog. I think there’s a duty to add a bit of research where you can because I think when people read a blog they expect a certain degree of expertise. Personally I find that interesting and fascinating in itself.

Similarly Lucinda (44, technology) who writes about the technology sector says that her writing is focused on the industry in which she works and influences the topics that she writes about: ‘There’s always a professional side to my writing because I love to share knowledge and learn about new trends.’ The gratification arises from the acquisition of knowledge that could help to enhance her career:

I’m picking up a lot of trends and things like that. I’m using this to firstly understand how this can help me in my professional life and then once I understand that I’m testing it of course and then I’m sharing my experience.

This example demonstrates that in terms of the interconnectedness between acquiring information and sharing it, it is not always possible to make a clear distinction on which produces the highest level of gratification, but it is important to acknowledge acquiring and sharing knowledge as a blended experience for some of the bloggers. Gratification from acquiring new knowledge is linked to the nature of the content posted, for some of the bloggers. Norma (28, creative writing) uses her blog as a way of promoting her black fiction series and gains gratification through undertaking research that informs her writing and adds authenticity: ‘It’s learning about other cultures or learning about other people’s opinions and viewpoints, what’s going on in terms of current affairs—you learn that on a daily basis.’ Michaela (44, business) writes ‘about myself as a black woman and the experiences I have as a black woman’ and gains gratification from the acquisition of personal knowledge—one of the dimensions of conversational learning (Baker et al, 2002). Her enjoyment occurs through: ‘learning about the people, about different topics and about what they like; learning about myself, how I react to a situation and when I read a blog the topic provokes my thoughts.’ Leona (29, arts and culture, Africa) uses her blog to showcase black creativity and gains a great sense of satisfaction from researching African Caribbean creative practitioners to highlight on her blog: ‘I think research and just exploring what’s out there is one of the most exciting things about blogging.’ However, she is also quite explicit in explaining that imparting this knowledge is also very rewarding:

On another level it’s nice to be in a position where you can let people know about these things and get them excited and share interesting, thought-provoking things that they wouldn’t have come across. So you’re sort of a curator and it expands your own knowledge.

This example is similar to that of Lucinda (44, technology) in that this is clearly a blended experience with the gratification from acquiring knowledge being equal to that of imparting it. However, for Leona (29, arts and culture, Africa) there is a clear link between the gratification and the content focused around black creativity that demonstrates the desire to address a gap in the mainstream media. Her later comments demonstrates, as with earlier examples, the role that feedback plays in increasing the level of gratification: ‘Knowing that people are enjoying and waiting for and interacting with the blog is very encouraging.’ For Gloria (27, arts and culture) who seeks to highlight black designers on her blog, the acquisition of knowledge relates to personal knowledge; one of the dimensions of conversational learning (Baker et al, 2002). In this instance, knowledge represents a journey of self-discovery:

I found it difficult to place myself one, as a designer and then two as a black person. I think the blog is kind of hinting to the fact that what is being black? That you wear African clothes and you speak with an accent?

Her gratification occurs through acquiring the knowledge that:

It’s discovering or almost promoting that black isn’t necessarily one thing even though we all come from the same place we’re all dispersed around the world so all our influences, even though they’re inherently African they all have different meanings.

#### **7.2.4 Social interaction**

The fourth factor expressed by participants as a primary gratification is social interaction. Fumi (29, creative writing) started out writing blogs as an online journal which eventually developed into a fictional series featuring Nigerian characters. When asked what she most enjoys about blogging, feedback was the main factor:

The fact that people comment on it, that’s the main thing, because for a long time writers just write but blogging helps me to get feedback. Just getting that feedback, getting the response, getting comments, that’s something blogging does that nothing else can do...that’s a very good buzz I get from blogging.

Whilst feedback is stated explicitly here, there is an underlying link to social interaction. Gratification is not gained purely from the appearance of comments to a blog post but

through the interaction that occurs between reader and blogger when the reader chooses to engage directly with the blogger. Expressing similar sentiments that make specific reference to interaction, Isaac (35, sports) who seeks to address negative stereotypes of African Caribbean people says:

It has to be said. Some of it is ego-driven. When you're blogging and you see one person following you, two people following you, three people following you and it goes on it encourages you to write more. When you blog and push that one button and it's going all around the world. Nothing more fulfilling than to see that someone says well done.

In both examples feedback and social interaction occur concurrently as a blended experience where feedback is received as recognition of competent, informative and entertaining writing, producing a sense of fulfilment. In the case of the male sports blogger, the level of gratification is heightened through awareness of his increasing audience. Charmaine (32, dating and relationships) also explicitly cites interaction as the main form of gratification:

I enjoy writing; I enjoy the interaction directly with the readers. Mine are humorous so it tends to be more interactive than if I was giving out information such as tips. Mine tend to be dating stories so people tend to connect more with them and they relate their stories back so there's a lot more interaction in my type of blogging than other types of blogging.

In this case, the type of content posted encourages readers to share their own experiences, increasing the level of interactivity and building familiarity between reader and blogger. Social interaction in the blogosphere is linked to significant outcomes beyond gratification, for example in facilitating the development of social capital. Social capital refers to a set of resources developed by individuals through the formation of strong and weak ties (Bourdieu & Wackant, 1992). It has also been defined as a 'network of goodwill, mutual support, shared norms, social trust and a sense of mutual obligation that people can derive value from' (Huysman & Wulf, 2004:1). The bloggers in this study cover a wide range of topics on their blogs that benefit from resources in the form of feedback, which may offer useful sources of information besides positive comments on a particular post. Blogs are also highly interactive due to linking practices that help to extend networks and increase connections. For many of the women bloggers, building an intimate level of engagement with their audiences is a consistent dimension of blogging linked to motivation, which also has implications for

facilitating the development of social capital. However, social capital extends beyond benefits to individual bloggers. It also ‘increases commitment to a community and ability to mobilise collective actions’ (Ellison et al, 2006:7). The findings outlined in section 7.1.2 demonstrate that a number of women bloggers in the study harness social capital for the purpose of empowering their communities, which is discussed further in section 8.3.

### **7.3 Conclusion**

Previous research by Nardi et al (2004) suggests that documenting life experiences, commentary, expressing deeply felt emotions, articulating ideas through writing and interacting in community forums as primary motivations for blogging. Later studies have added information searching, refining motivations as linked to behavioural orientations of information search and social interaction (Huang et al, 2007). Whilst this study on African Caribbean bloggers shares some similarities in the findings, the three clear motivations uncovered are linked to voice visibility and empowerment. There are key differences in methodology that can account for the difference in findings and the manner in which the findings are presented.

Within this study on African Caribbean bloggers, documenting life experiences, commentary and opinion, expressing emotions, articulating ideas and information searching are all dimensions of the participants’ activities. However, based on their narratives, these are not the primary gratifications of the bloggers. Whilst the study by Nardi et al (2004) also used interviews as a research method, their sample comprised bloggers within a university community. Whilst the majority of African Caribbean bloggers are degree-educated, they are employed in a variety of professions. Furthermore, the study by Huang et al (2007) used only a quantitative method, surveys. There are also differences in the sample size and sampling method. A major difference is that this study is the only study on motivation where the sample is entirely comprised of African Caribbean bloggers based in the UK. The other major factor is the research methodology. This is a critical study that has embedded theories relevant to race and gender into the research process, in particular, critical race theory. In this regard the in-depth interviews as the constructed narratives of the bloggers represent the centring of the black voice and black experience. It is argued here that the findings present a nuanced understanding of the primary motivations for blogging that are unique to this particular sample and cannot be generalised as representative of the wider blogosphere. It is argued here that the motivations of voice and visibility can be intrinsic, linked to interests or



experience in writing and journalism, adapted to a personalised, opinionated and sometimes performative narrative. Voice and visibility, as motivations can also be linked to some of the negative experiences as African Caribbean people in British society such as the perception of being excluded or misrepresented within the mainstream media. For some of the black women bloggers this is more pronounced due to intersectional invisibility, which results in their absence from generic representations of women or African Caribbean people. It is also argued here that a need for self-efficacy and self-determination are also strong motivations for blogging, especially among women business bloggers. A small number of women bloggers are also motivated by the need to empower others, especially by highlighting the contribution of African Caribbean people to the business and creative sectors. It is argued here that underlying motivations exist amongst some of the participants to generate voice and visibility for African Caribbean people, to challenge dominant discourses and negative perceptions and stereotypes. These motivations result in the use of blogs as a discursive form of resistance to racial oppression, as counterhegemonic practice, as a form of online political participation and as discursive activism.

Previous research has advanced process, content and social interaction as primary groups of gratifications that contain factors such as emotion management (process) life documenting (content) and discussion (social interaction) (Sepp et al, 2007). Other studies have linked self-expression as a major gratification and social interaction to a lesser degree (Papacharissi, 2007). In common with the findings on motivation, whilst there are some similarities, the differences can be attributed to methodology. These findings on the gratifications of African Caribbean bloggers present a nuanced understanding that is unique to this particular sample. However, it is argued here that voice, knowledge sharing, knowledge acquisition and social interaction are the primary gratifications of the participants. There is a strong link between motivation and gratification in relation to voice as a primary factor. For some of the participants gratification is strongly linked to the specific content posted about African Caribbean people defined here as 'Black Knowledge'. Both knowledge sharing and knowledge acquisition are dimensions of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and conversational learning (Baker et al, 2002) which has particular relevance to blogging. It is also argued that some gratifications occur concurrently through what this author terms 'blended gratifications' as a result of intersecting factors. The combination of sharing knowledge and receiving positive feedback is one such example. According to Bourdieu's (1989) habitus-capital theory, four types of capital exist: economic, cultural, social and

symbolic. Cultural capital pertains to knowledge, skills and abilities. The internet facilitates the development of cultural capital because it stores vast amounts of knowledge that can be utilised for educational purposes (Meyen et al, 2010). As discussed earlier in this chapter, the findings reveal that the bloggers in this study generate knowledge through their blogs as well as acquiring new knowledge during the process of undertaking research for their posts. 'Black Knowledge' has been defined as a particular type of knowledge that highlights the contribution of people of African descent to arts and culture, music, literature, enterprise and many other sectors. Thus it can be argued that some of the bloggers harness cultural capital in unique ways that promote their cultural heritage and help to diversify and enrich the media landscape.

Voice is a prominent theme in these findings both in terms of motivation and gratification that to some extent is driven by a need to counter voicelessness and invisibility, not just within the public sphere but in general terms as African Caribbean people in British society. Whilst racism is clearly a contributory factor, other explanations can be found. Couldry (2010) conceptualises voice both in terms of a value and a process. Value refers to the act of valuing voice as a process, whilst as a process, voice refers to giving account of one's life, condition and place in the world. According to Couldry, voice is a principle dimension of human existence that represents not merely one's view of the world that should be acknowledged, but a process that needs to be 'effective'; that is to be seen and heard. Couldry argues that neoliberalism has reduced the social, cultural and political dimensions of everyday life to a market-driven agenda and as a consequence, our ability to have an 'effective' voice has been diminished to the extent that neoliberal discourses deny the importance of voice, making it redundant. The neoliberal hegemony is deeply embedded in society and reinforced through social, cultural, economic and political structures and perpetuated through dominant discourses in every area of public life, including the media. Couldry's critique of neoliberalism is reminiscent of Chomsky and Herman's (1995) *Manufacturing Consent*, highlighting how within western democracies the media serves the interests of the powerful and elite and maintains the status quo through propaganda. It is also reminiscent of McChesney's work (1998, 1999) warning how a market-driven news media concentrated in the hands of a few conglomerates has led to a shift in the role of the news media. The consequences are the reduction of audiences from their conception as a public to consumers and objects of cross selling to boost the profits of shareholders. In both examples, the dominance of economic forces driven by a market-focused agenda is the underlying

theme. However, Couldry's critique and analysis goes beyond a sociological inquiry of the media to interrogate philosophical, political, social and economic theories and frameworks. He also ventures beyond the confines of the US to demonstrate how, in developing countries like India, neoliberalism reigns supreme. Couldry's theory on neoliberalism provides a broader context in which to place the concept of voice beyond this study in illuminating how neoliberalism engenders voicelessness, an essential facet of humanity, that to deny equates to a form of dehumanisation. This conceptualisation helps to explain why voice is such a strong motivating factor and why the perception of having an effective voice is so gratifying to the bloggers in this study. The significance of voice in the findings also links to Bourdieu's (1989:20) concept of symbolic power. It can be argued that the blogosphere provides a platform 'for symbolic struggles over the power to produce and to impose the legitimate vision of the world' which can take the form of 'representation, individual or collective'. The narratives of the bloggers demonstrate resistance to neoliberal hegemony as well as dominant ideologies that promote negative constructions of black identity. As argued by Brock et al (2010:1045) the counterhegemonic forms of resistance deployed by some black bloggers can be conceptualised as 'Afrocentric forms of cultural capital'.

Overall, these findings reveal that motivation and gratification for some of the participants are linked to generic factors, such as having a voice in the public sphere where there is no specific link to race or ethnicity and therefore some of these findings are consistent with other studies on the blogosphere. However, for some of the participants both motivation and gratification are clearly linked to issues of race and representation that are specific to the unique experiences of African Caribbean people in British society. It is argued here that with regard to motivation, voice, visibility and empowerment are all dimensions that relate to the ways in which these are limited or restricted. In effect, motivation is driven by voicelessness, invisibility and disempowerment. However, the actions of the bloggers represent resistance and the use of blogs as a means of restoring voice and visibility and generating empowerment through self-efficacy, both for themselves and others. Examining motivation for blogging and gratification from authoring blogs also points to the variety of ways that blogs are used by the participants as an assertive strategy, as a tool of resistance against racial oppression, resistance against negative stereotypes, exclusion and misrepresentation in the mainstream media. Uncovering how blogs are used by African Caribbean people is one of the objectives of this study and this has been revealed through the narratives of the participants. The activities of the participants in this study, whilst representing a social and cultural practice,

can also be conceptualised in terms of online political participation, discursive activism and counterhegemonic practice that are characteristic of alternative media.

Motivation and gratification are just two areas of exploration within this study on African Caribbean bloggers. Whilst this chapter has uncovered links between the representation of African Caribbean people in the mainstream media and motivation and gratification, the following chapter looks more closely at race and ethnicity in the construction of blogging identities presented to audiences and in the racial and ethnic identities of the bloggers' cultivated audiences. It examines their perspectives on how African Caribbean people are represented within the mainstream media and their perceptions on the social and political impact through their activities as bloggers on African Caribbean communities and the wider society.

## **Chapter 8: Identity, Representation and Social Impact in the Blogosphere**

‘It’s important that people understand that it’s written by a black woman...I think it’s quite important in general when it comes to Black writing that it needs to come from us.’ Grace (35, creative writing)

This chapter presents the narratives of the bloggers in this study as CRT praxis and in doing so seeks to centre and privilege the voices of the participants and acknowledge their role in the construction of new knowledge to arise from these findings. The first section is concerned with the racial and ethnic identities presented to audiences and the racial and ethnic identities of the bloggers’ target audiences. One of the objectives of this study is to understand the impact of race in the construction of blogging identities and in the cultivation of audiences. This chapter documents the complex ways that blogs are utilised to reconfigure and present identities in public and private spaces online. The second section in this chapter presents a selection of perspectives on how African Caribbean people are represented within the mainstream media as a combination of narratives from the interviews and extracts of the blog post referred to during interview. The language-in-use method of discourse analysis developed by Gee (2005, 2011) has been employed to capture the social, cultural and political meanings. As a platform for the construction of narratives, blogs are a form of storytelling and the extracts included in this section are an integral element of CRT praxis employed in this chapter. It should be noted that, as indicated in chapter four, extracts have only been included where consent was given by participants for their use to over-ride the anonymity practiced elsewhere in this thesis. While discourse analysis accounts for a small component of the qualitative analysis, the extracts have been interwoven with the participants’ comments during interview to add continuity and context to the chapter. In chapter three, which presents the preliminary findings from the questionnaire, it was revealed that the participants are motivated to write blog posts when stories about African Caribbean people appear in the mainstream media. Section 7.2 of this chapter seeks to uncover the forms of representation that motivate responses and to analyse how the bloggers react to these representations. This links to the third research question: how are blogs used to address issues of representation within the mainstream media? The final section presents the bloggers’ perceptions on the social and political impact of their activities as bloggers on African Caribbean communities and the wider society. This links to the last research question: what are the perceptions of the bloggers on the wider social and political impact of their blogs? The aim here is both to

understand the degree of importance participants attach to social impact and to reveal their own perceptions on the level of social impact their blogs generate.

### **8.1 Racial and ethnic identity in online spaces**

Previous research suggests that individuals use the internet to construct and negotiate their identities and to experience a sense of community and racial identity (Byrne, 2008; Brock, 2009). The internet has been conceptualised as a 'third space' for discussing the meaning of Black identity (Brock, 2009:17) and as a medium for 'political struggle over racial meaning, knowledge and values' (Daniels, 2012:10). Kendall (1998) argues that online spaces do not necessarily change how an individual views their identity, nor the significance of power relations attached to racial hierarchies. Race, class and gender remain the most dominant dimensions of identity online, despite the promise of fluidity in cyberspace. The internet has also been conceptualised as a medium that reproduces existing racial stereotypes that exist offline. Nakamura (2002:3) argues that the internet functions as an extension of western imperialism maintained through the process of *cybertyping*. This is defined as 'the distinctive ways that the internet propagates, disseminates and commodifies images of race and racism'. 'Identity tourism' refers to the process of adopting alternative identities in virtual worlds like SecondLife, using prostheses, avatars and images that are so similar to those that exist offline that they contribute to the reproduction of old racial stereotypes. There is therefore no escape from race and racism online (Daniels, 2012).

Central to understanding the process by which identities are constructed in the blogosphere is the concept of the internet as both a public and private space. Gurak & Antonijevic (2008:60) describe the internet as 'the one and the many, the individual and the collective, the personal and the political'. This is in reference to the potential of virtual spaces to unite individuals from divergent backgrounds unknown to each other offline, around topics of common interest. Through this process online communities emerge, blending public and private spaces. Public and private also refers to the blogosphere as a reflexive and rhetorical space and the blog as an online journal written for the purpose of self-expression whilst simultaneously aiming to reach a wider audience (Miller & Shepherd, 2004). In this regard, blogs function as 'a single, semiprivate or semipublic space and experience' and through this interaction with audiences, blogging can be conceptualised as a process of 'rewriting oneself' Gurak & Antonijevic (2008:61).

In chapter two, section 2.3, the term ‘blogging while black’ was examined in reference to its use by Chris Rabb (2005), a prominent African American blogger. It refers to a moral obligation by people of African descent to blog openly and not anonymously on issues of concern to African American communities, using blogs as a platform for discursive activism. I am keen to understand whether such perceptions exist within the UK amongst African Caribbean bloggers. The previous chapter demonstrates that for some of the participants, issues of representation and experiences as African Caribbean people in British society are powerful motivations for blogging. The participants of this study were asked what importance they afford to audiences knowing their racial identity. Almost three quarters of the bloggers consider it important to present their racial or ethnic identity to audiences. Almost half expressed this in fairly explicit terms, like Grace (35, creative writing) who supplies the epigraph. Close to one third of the participants stated that their racial identities would be obvious to audiences due to profile photographs on their blogs and since the nature of content posted is often focused on African Caribbean people. Two of the participants, whilst acknowledging pride in their racial and ethnic identity also expressed frustration with racial and ethnic markers and a desire to resist labeling. Four participants, whilst acknowledging the importance of identifying themselves racially and/or ethnically, expressed concern that a ‘black’ identity could be limiting in terms of attracting wide audiences.

Given the significance of voice and visibility as motivational factors and as primary sources of gratification amongst the participants it is unsurprising that the majority of bloggers in this study afford great importance to making their racial and ethnic identities known. Anonymity in cyberspace is not a viable option for individuals or groups seeking to establish a presence within an ideological space dominated by white, male interests. The internet perpetuates hegemonic whiteness that relegates non-white groups to the peripheries of cyberspace (Everett, 2009; Farquharson, 2005). However, blogs enable a process of self-representation in which everyday forms of racism can be questioned and challenged by exposing cultural practices, attitudes and dominant discourses that perpetuate exclusion and inferiority. Anonymity as bloggers would be counter-productive to engendering visibility and voice, which accounts for the high degree of importance the participants attach to presenting their racial and ethnic identity to their audiences. The individual reasons advanced by the participants broadly fall within three realms. The first relates to authenticity around the need of some bloggers to demonstrate that they are qualified to speak on issues that concern and impact African Caribbean people by virtue of knowledge gained through their lived

experiences. The second relates to the desire to openly challenge negative stereotypes and the third is concerned with promoting positive perceptions about African Caribbean people through the process of self and community representation.

### **8.1.1 Authenticity**

Of the three quarters of participants that said they attach importance to audiences knowing their racial and/or ethnic identity, less than one fifth conveyed authenticity as the principle cause for divulgence. This includes Grace (35, creative writing): ‘It’s important that people understand that it’s written by a black woman...I think it’s quite important in general when it comes to Black writing that it needs to come from us.’ This statement speaks firstly to the perception of the existence of a body of literature known as ‘Black writing’ and the belief that such literature should be written only by those racialised as black. She attaches huge importance to the issue of authenticity in her additional comments: ‘I want to be quite authentic, it has to be authentic.’ This is the blogger introduced in the previous chapter for whom voice is a major form of gratification specifically linked to content about the black British experience expressed through humour. Her knowledge is drawn from lived experience and it is important to her that her audiences understand her view of the world, her construction of her subjective reality. Her gratification is amplified by positive feedback and arguably there is an expectation that sharing this knowledge and experience with other members of the in-group will generate positive feedback, reinforcing the sense of community. The importance of divulging her racial identity is also linked to her cultivated audiences—the people whom she hopes and expects to read her blog, members of the in-group:

I visualize people like me; my age, maybe between 20-35, black women and men, but I think that because I’m writing from the eyes of a woman I’m assuming it’s women. I kind of bounce between women and men; I visualize black people my age living in resistance in Britain going through the same old problems.

This statement speaks to a sense of both the public and private, whereby through visualizing her audience of black men and women, she assumes a common experience of racism by African Caribbean people in British society that she expects other members of the in-group to relate to, but especially black women. She constructs her subjective reality not purely on the basis of race, but also gender, creating an imagined audience that is a mirror of herself. In writing from the perspective of a black woman and visualizing a mostly black female



audience, Grace (35, creative writing) assumes a collective, black female consciousness. Her narrative provides an important geographical context in alluding to everyday experiences of African Caribbean people that define an ongoing struggle against racism. The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century signaled the emergence of ‘a distinctive and simultaneous blackness and Britishness’ as an expression of a unique identity (Young, 2010:46), rendering greater importance for African Caribbean women in locating their experiences as black women within a British context (Amos and Parmar; 2005:46).

Lisa (33, social issues) gains gratification through knowledge sharing of a professional nature and also makes reference, though in less explicit terms, to authenticity as an important factor around the divulgence of racial identity:

I am a black woman who happens to write. I am also a writer who's a woman who happens to be black. Whatever way you put it, I cannot in my way of how I view life eradicate the fact that I'm black and that may have an effect on how I view things.

Both women demonstrate how Black women's lived experience as members of raced, gendered and classed groups greatly influence their world view (Collins, 1990). Lisa (33, social issues) offers a reason for the importance of blogging openly as a black woman that alludes to authenticity: ‘I think it's really important because if I'm writing so honestly and transparently why would I not be transparent with who I am?’ The first part of the statement implies awareness both of multiple identities in terms of race, gender and her vocation as a writer but also an acceptance that race is the most dominant facet of identity that shapes her world view. According to Nazroo & Karlsen (2003), two dimensions of identity exist: external racialised categories imposed by dominant, political, economic and cultural hegemonies onto minority groups signified as the ‘other’ and internally defined identities that reflect individual agency. Self-defined identities are to a degree influenced by external labels. However, her acceptance that as a black woman in Britain, her self-defined identity is in part influenced by her position in relation to dominant, white British society, does not mean that she sees herself through the lens of the dominant culture. The second part of her statement suggests that authenticity is important to her not solely in the sense of speaking with authority on issues concerning African Caribbean people but in the sense of speaking from a position of openness and transparency equated with honesty, which is clearly an important personal value. The significance attached to this authenticity is also linked to her cultivated audience

which although she describes as ‘cross[ing] racial boundaries’ later states that ‘some posts have become more tailored to black people’. She goes on to say: ‘Obviously I’ll be speaking to black people who it resonates with but if a white person happens to read it or an Asian person or whoever reads it and gets something from it, fine.’ In accepting that many of her posts constructed from the perspective of a black British woman will appeal largely to African Caribbean audiences, in common with Grace (35, creative writing), there is an assumption of shared perspectives and experiences. But whilst accepting this as a basis for inclusion and a sense of community, does not see this as a basis for the exclusion of other racial groups: ‘Just because I’m talking about my hair I’m not rejecting other people. It’s open for everyone.’

Speaking in similar terms, Julia (21, fashion) whose motivation and gratification is linked to a love of writing and journalism, still sees an importance in speaking authentically to a black audience from the position of the in-group, when writing about issues deemed to be of concern to African Caribbean communities:

If I’m writing about something that affects our community then I’ll want people to know that look, I’m not just a random person...I know what I’m saying, kind of. But then in other situations I don’t think it’s a big deal.

Central to her perception is the notion that being a member of the in-group, the African Caribbean community, denotes shared understanding and perspectives. In order to enact this sense of community and demonstrate a qualification to speak on black issues, revealing one’s racial and ethnic identity is central to this process as she further explains:

It shouldn’t really matter but in some situations it would matter whereby you need to validate your point, like what does she know about us? And it’s like yeah, I’m one of you so I really do think I know.

Whilst she visualizes her cultivated audience as ‘just anybody really’ suggesting an ethnically diverse readership, there is still a perception that many of her posts will attract readers like herself from the black British community and revealing her racial and ethnic identity as a member of the in-group validates her knowledge acquired through her lived experience as a African Caribbean woman in British society.

Adrian (30, social commentary) has carved out a niche as a social commentator and has motivations and gratification linked to an interest in writing and journalism, in common with Julia (21, fashion). He expresses similar views in terms of authenticity as a discretionary strategy employed only when writing posts that are targeted at African Caribbean communities:

I don't think it's important on every post. There are some posts where I feel it probably is important because I feel people should know that I'm speaking. If I'm speaking about something particularly in relation to the African Diaspora then I think it's important that people realise that I'm speaking about this from an informed standpoint...a standpoint where I'm kind of an authority on this because I'm living it, it's my life. These are posts where I wouldn't want people to be dismissive of what I've got to say because I know what I'm talking about.

Counterhegemonic discourse through the articulation of a self-defined black woman's standpoint is a strategy used by black women to resist race, class and gendered oppression and represents spaces that black women create to construct their own self-definitions and oppose dominant constructions of black female identity (Collins, 1990). Black British women have always sought out spaces from which to speak (Young, 2010) and blogs have been appropriated by black women as a platform 'to articulate their vision of black womanhood' (Brock et al, 2010:1056). The authenticity of black identity and the black experience is highly contested. Efforts to challenge negative representations of African Caribbean people in Britain through cultural projects in the seventies seeking to reject objectification, presenting 'authentic' images of blackness have been critiqued as a means of reproducing essentialist notions of black identity:

Although black people become active agents because they are now the subject rather than the object of representational practices, the cultural politics of the black movement implies that it is only by allowing the other to speak that an authentic depiction of the black experience is possible. This mimic approach to representation assumes that a real black experience is out there in the world and that this experience is distorted and misrepresented when it originates from a privileged white position. (Marotta, 2001:542)

In the conceptualisation of new ethnicities as argued by Hall (1996), authenticity is not guaranteed as black identity is contested through new discourses in which history, language and culture play key roles in the construction of identities. However, online ethnicities, defined as ‘new’ in the context of their construction through computer mediated communication, according to Marotta, (2001) do have the potential to renegotiate, reconfigure and re-represent ethnicities, in the same way that Hall’s (1996) conception of new ethnicities have the potential either to reinforce essentialist notions of black identity or to disrupt them. For the bloggers in this study, authenticity as a dimension of blogging practice is about imparting knowledge based on their unique perspectives that serve as counter-narratives to dominant discourses. It functions as a tool against raced and gendered oppression that does not necessarily reflect the belief of a homogenous black identity but represents a standpoint from which they explore, negotiate and define their own subjective reality.

### **8.1.2 Challenging negative stereotypes**

The second reason advanced by some of the participants for divulging racial and ethnic identity relates to a perceived obligation to blog openly within and beyond African Caribbean communities as a strategy for challenging negative stereotypes. This is not necessarily an exclusive process, but sometimes operates in conjunction with the desire for an authentic voice. Adrian (30, social commentary) who speaks of authenticity in terms of a discretionary strategy directed at African Caribbean audiences also expresses the desire to overcome negative perceptions:

I think as a black man it’s important that someone can write in an articulate and cultured way. They should think that means that there are black people who can write like that. I think that is important and I think there is a responsibility of black people to counter all the negative perceptions that there are of us.

This statement reveals an underlying perception that black men are not generally regarded by the wider society as being articulate and intelligent, which demands intervention. The significance attached to this is expressed in terms of a moral obligation to challenge not just this negative stereotype, but *all* of the negative perceptions perpetuated about black communities.

Jennifer (28, business) is motivated by the need to have an assertive, entrepreneurial voice and showcase black businesses. Her motivation for divulging her racial and ethnic identity is not just a strategy for challenging negative perceptions about African Caribbean people held by the wider society, but also a means of challenging negative perceptions that African Caribbean people hold about themselves:

It's as well to dispel and try and discourage some of the negative stereotypes that we have as black people when it comes to business that we're not comfortable, that we don't do things properly, that kind of thing. I'm of the mindset that we need to be able to elevate and remove ourselves from the social stereotypes that even our own community imposes on ourselves and the fastest way to do that is online.

The psychological consequences of racial oppression have been conceptualised as internalised racism, defined as the acceptance of negative perceptions by members of oppressed groups perpetuated by dominant cultures. 'It is characterised by their not believing in others who look like them, and not believing in themselves' (Jones, 2000:1213). Jennifer (28, business) demonstrates an awareness of internalized racism and how it manifests through a lack of self-worth, self-value and a belief in limited capabilities. Self-denial and self-negation by people of African descent as a racially oppressed group has also been termed *Acquired Anti Own Race Syndrome*, defined as 'the philosophy and psychology of assumed European world cultural superiority expressed by African peoples in their relations with each other and in perceiving and operating in the world' (Hutton, 1997:20). The comments by Jennifer (28, business) demonstrates that the divulgence of racial and ethnic identity is also used as a strategy for addressing internalised racism by showcasing African Caribbean businesses to disprove negative and stereotypical perceptions about black business people.

Michaela (44, business) also talks explicitly about her reasons for divulging her racial identity both in terms of challenging stereotypes and in terms of transparency:

It's very important that they know who I am. I feel it's important for people to know I'm a black woman and I'm not a stereotype. It's about this is who I am, this is my identity, it's holistic. It's really important. I don't want to give an idea that I'm white.

This statement speaks to a sense of racial pride implicit in the reference to the rejection of human characteristics assigned by others. There is also an assertion being made that being open about one's racial identity online is a natural process that has positive benefits for mental health. Modood (1994:8) argues that racialised minorities often experience a heightened sense of their 'mode of being' through projecting the facets of their identity that engender 'self-pride' and 'solidarity'. The sense of solidarity is reinforced through the cultivation of her audience, whom she acknowledges are most likely to be other African Caribbeans who identify with her articulated experiences: 'Most of my audience is black, because it's about black female experience...my posts are about myself as a black woman and the experiences I have as a black woman.' However, in common with Lisa (33, social issues) she does not see her unique experiences and perspectives as a black woman as a basis for excluding other cultures: 'It's open to anyone who can resonate with that... they're not ...aimed at black people only.'

### **8.1.3 Self and community representation**

The third reason advanced by some of the participants for divulging racial and ethnic identity relates to self and community representation. For Leona (29, arts and culture, Africa) whose motivation is linked to showcasing African arts and creativity, divulging her racial and ethnic identity is an essential component of her strategy to address the marginalization of black creativity. Her cultivated audience is 'Africans both on the continent and in the Diaspora' who need to know her racial identity:

Because a lot of the content that I post is from my observation or things from my experience and those are directly coloured by who I am, so I think it's important for that. Also there's this whole question of representation and so I feel like I'm contributing to increasing the number of spaces there are for Africans and Diaspora Africans representing themselves and their culture and their experience. So it's extremely important.

Divulging racial and ethnic identity is used as a mechanism for increasing representation of African culture within the public sphere. Leona's (29, arts and culture, Africa) narrative exemplifies the adeptness of black bloggers in appropriating technology to harness cultural capital (Brock et al, 2010). This statement reveals a high degree of significance attached to shared experiences and perspectives with the in-group. Divulging racial and ethnic identity

enacts a sense of community and also denotes both self-representation and representation of African Caribbean communities and culture. For Nadine (31, wedding and bridal) who is motivated by the need to counter invisibility and symbolic annihilation; divulging her racial and ethnicity identity is part of a strategy to facilitate representation and ‘really important’ because ‘I know for me, it’s so valuable to look at images and see people that look like me. I buy magazines, I’m a media junkie and I just don’t see it enough, so seeing that kind of thing makes me happy.’ Whilst her actions serve to fulfil her need for self-representation through the representation of African Caribbean brides, they also serve the wider purpose of challenging hegemonic whiteness in cyberspace by demonstrating the racial and ethnic diversity of British identity that is widely associated with white identity and produced and perpetuated through exclusionary processes rooted in discourses which create boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Campbell, 2008).

#### **8.1.4 The limitations of a black identity in online spaces**

Yet for some participants, the projection of a black identity in the blogosphere is perceived as problematic; not on account of internalized racism, but rather in resistance to racial and ethnic markers. Lilian (32, lifestyle) who is motivated by an interest in creative writing, expresses this view:

I don’t always want to be defined by labels but at the same time I don’t want people to be ignorant. I think that my description does mention that I am Afro Caribbean or Jamaican by way of the UK, so I have already shared that information.

Whilst divulging her racial and ethnic identity on her blog so that her audience can identify her, there is still some concern about being racialised. However, she later concedes that even though her blog is targeted at a wide audience, her readers are most likely to be African Caribbeans:

My cousin...says she sees my blog as a blog for black women but it’s not [intended] for black women. It’s just that it’s reflective of my own experience. It’s not for black women; it’s for any woman who has an interest in the topics I write about.

Clearly there is a wider issue that relates to the invisibility of whiteness through its claims to neutrality and universality, while excluding or marginalising other racial groups over which it assumes superiority. So for example, a white blogger is assumed to write in a broad sense about all aspects of a particular topic whilst detaching him or herself from their values, beliefs and experiences that shape their perspectives. By contrast, a blogger from any other ethnic group than white, such as African Caribbean, is assumed to write only about 'black' issues.

For Beverley (32, social commentary) who enjoys a more intimate relationship with her audiences through blogging; it's an issue of humanity:

When you write it's because you want to share something and I don't think that race should always determine who reads what. I'm very proud of my African heritage; I don't shy away from it. But at the end of the day who you are as a human being should shine through first. I think your humanity should come through in your writing before your nationality or race or anything else because at the end of the day that's who we are, human beings.

She is clearly stating an ideal, advocating that an author's race should not be a factor in determining readership, whilst making a case for humanity as the moral choice. Her later comment suggests the likelihood that although not all of her audience is comprised of Africans, they probably account for a large proportion of her readership: 'The audience varies and is diverse; I can't just say it's only Africans that read it.'

For two of the participants, there is an acute awareness that within and beyond the blogosphere, the construction of a black identity can be counterproductive in attempts to attract multicultural audiences, as Charmaine (32, dating and relationships) explains:

I don't blog particularly for a black audience. I do talk about being African and I do talk about being black...it's clear that I'm a black woman. I don't want to have this that I'm representing a black female audience. It's very restrictive if you go for a black female...I can't limit myself to being a black female writer.

This statement reveals both personal conflict and a sense of frustration about the consequences of being racialised as black, in the blogosphere. Whilst she acknowledges that



being black and female shapes her perspectives she does not wish to be typecast or labelled as a 'black' writer, which she sees as limiting in terms of cultivating wide audiences. This demonstrates an awareness of the double-standard that whiteness confers on non-white ethnic groups, referred to earlier in this section. This is the awareness that whilst a white racial identity is perceived in a universal sense, other racial identities are perceived as narrow and restrictive and not having a wide appeal.

For Caroline (44, arts and culture) who draws on her background in creative arts to promote black designers; a black identity online can be a drawback in business, despite her best efforts to address under-representation in the mainstream: 'For the business side, people can be ignorant, people can you know, not want to buy... unconsciously or consciously not have confidence in a black business.' She later explains her plans to adopt a strategy to counter the prejudice against black businesses that involves starting another blog: 'The business side will still have an African Caribbean feel to my designs but if I want to create an income from it then it will have to appeal to a wider audience.' This statement suggests an awareness of racial stereotyping that results in racial prejudice and internalised racism (she later added the reference both to black and other racial groups), that has economic consequences that threaten success in business. This leads her to a solution that involves establishing another blog purely for business that will presumably be presented in a racially neutral way, although it is not clear exactly how this will be achieved.

Nancy (33, career and lifestyle) is motivated to blog by an under-representation of positive black role models in the mainstream, especially black mothers. However, despite deeming it important to divulge her racial identity on her blog and despite her desire to cultivate a black audience, she stills sees a black identity as limiting in terms of attracting wide readership:

I definitely want to capture that black audience and I want to show that black people, we do other things; we're not just doing one type of thing. I wanted to be quite inclusive that any nationality, any race can come onto the blog and feel at home and feel welcome. It's just a case of this is a black woman writing about her life, her family...but I have veered away from being too black-centric because I didn't want it to be alienating.

This statement alludes to white racial power and privilege. A white woman blogging about her life and family is widely perceived as a lifestyle blogger. She does not have to concern

herself with fears that having a 'white' racial identity will alienate audiences. This is because whiteness contains a set of discursive powers that render it nameless and naturalized, where it defines itself as the norm and where it asserts itself as the primary mode of understanding. In this regard, what are essentially white, European values, beliefs and traditions are presented as being representative of all ethnic groups (Gabriel, 2000). Whiteness functions as a 'discursive space' which has implications of power for those racialised as white and those who are not. Discursive power manifests through the discourse of those racialised as white that is treated as the norm, while the perspectives of racialised minorities are treated as a deviation from the norm and judged as inferior. Whiteness therefore operates from a central, influential, territorial position that determines within the social structure of society what spaces people can occupy (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Within the context of British society people racialised as white represent a socially, economically and politically powerful group with the capacity to categorise and label others while retaining invisibility. Discursive power exists through the process of 'othering' that locates those racialised as white at the centre of power and ethnic minorities at the periphery (Long & Hilton, 2002). A cursory glance at lifestyle blogs authored by white women reveal few images of non-white people, nor references to non-white people in blog posts beyond celebrities. Yet the hegemonic whiteness that dominates the blogosphere and the internet in general, is rendered invisible. This reflects the very nature of hegemonic whiteness, which functions as 'a shifting configuration of patterns and meanings that occupy the dominant position in a particular racial formation and that successfully manage to occupy the empty space of "normality" in our culture"' (Lewis, 2004:634).

## **8.2 Representation: African Caribbean people in the mainstream media**

'There was that whole thing about the University of London lecturer who said that black women weren't attractive. I was pissed off about that and I remember signing an online petition which I don't normally do and it really got me thinking. You know, how we are seen; we are either demonised or fantasied, it's one extreme to the other' Chioma (48, race, gender and politics).

In chapter four, which presents the preliminary findings from the questionnaire, it was revealed that more than three quarters of participants are motivated to write blog posts when stories about African Caribbean people appear in the mainstream media. This section presents a selection of responses from some of the participants as a combination of narratives from the

interviews and extracts of the blog post referred to during interview. The aim here is to explore their perceptions of how African Caribbean people are represented in the mainstream media and to analyse how they respond to these representations.

### 8.2.1 Representation of women

The epigraph is by Chioma (48, race, gender and politics) who defines her identity as an African womanist and whose motivation for blogging is linked to voice and visibility. The article she refers to was written by Satoshi Kanazawa, a lecturer at the London School of Economics, published in *Psychology Today* (Scribd, 2011). The headline read: *Why are black women rated less physically attractive than other women but black men are rated better looking than other men?* In the article, Kanazawa claims the findings of scientific research prove black women are perceived to be less attractive than women from other ethnic groups. Beauty is socially constructed and informed by several characteristics that include race; therefore racism is sufficient to explain why light skin is perceived as more desirable than dark skin (Hunter, 2004). Black women have historically been constructed as the other and judged according to European standards of beauty that value light skin and straight hair. Whiteness as the embodiment of beauty exists within a socially constructed system of privilege and superiority to Blackness (Collins, 1990). The epigraph expresses a deep sense of frustration and anger at the manner in which black women have been represented in the article. Her statement indicates that the contents incensed her to the point of going beyond voicing her disapproval to engaging in social action by completing an online petition, which she admits is not something she would normally do. Her final sentence reveals her perception of black women as represented through dominant discourses of demonization and fantasy. Representations of black women in the mainstream are largely negative and stereotypical (Brock et al, 2010; Collins, 1990) ranging from ‘the sexual siren; the rotund, full-bosomed nurturing mother figure; the dominating matriarch incarnate, eternally ill-tempered wenches and wretched victims’ (Bobo, 2001:56).

For Nadine (31, wedding and bridal) what most concerns her and motivates her to blog is the under-representation of black women in the mainstream media. Whilst her initial focus was black brides, she also uses her blog as a platform to highlight the rare occasions that black women appear in the mainstream:

A lot of my posts are inspired by the mainstream media. I think the whole premise of the blog is it celebrates where black people are featured. It's about celebrating when black women are in the mainstream, whether it's weddings or any kind of media.

One such post published in July 2011 under the headline: *Leading lady Naomie Harris*, profiles the actress who was featured in the Huffington Post (2011) as a serious contender for a leading role in the upcoming James Bond film, which at that time was referred to as 'Bond 23'. Her blog post reads:

If the rumours are to be believed, the gorgeous Naomie Harris is going to be the next Bond Girl! I hope it is true, it's about time we had a black British actress in that role. So in homage to Naomie and in the hope this comes to fruition I have taken the opportunity to profile a young lady who doesn't get enough attention in the press but I think she is a stellar actress and someone who I rate highly in the style stakes!

Whilst extremely brief at a mere 85 words, the post manages both to celebrate the success of the actress whilst making a political statement about the representation of black women in the media. Harris is profiled as a beautiful black *British* actress who is talented and stylish and deserves wider recognition but is largely ignored by the press. There is also a broader comment about the paucity of black actresses who secure leading roles in the popular James Bond movies, widely perceived as a very British institution. The reference to Harris as black *British* serves as a reminder that British identity is often associated with whiteness (Campbell, 2008). The text is accompanied by visual images; two large full-length images, one of the actress at the Glamour Women of the Year Awards in London and the other at the edge of a pool at a celebrity barbecue in Los Angeles. There are also two further head and shoulders images of the actress wearing different hairstyles. The images are a central feature of the post as they serve both to illuminate and reinforce the blogger's view of Harris as a beautiful actress who exudes sartorial elegance. The images are a key component of the blog post and its representation of black women. These examples demonstrate how black women use blogs as counterhegemonic practice to challenge European beauty ideals and dominant constructions of black womanhood (Brock et al, 2010).

### 8.2.2 Representation of men

Luther (43, social commentary) writes about issues related to black popular culture and the African/Caribbean Diasporas. During the interview he revealed that in April 2012, a television interview featuring boxer Frank Bruno brought to the surface his sense of frustration with what he perceives as the emasculation of black men in the media:

These are issues that have been bubbling for years, about black men and how they're perceived and black masculinity and how you basically have to be an Uncle Tom for them to accept you in this society – and they don't like strong black men and all these things. These were in my head for years but I'd never expressed it in writing.

This statement articulates the perception that only a specific type of black male identity attracts widespread popularity amongst the British public. In the blogger's view, there is an aversion to a strong, powerful black male identity that has reduced the popular image of the black male within British society to that of an 'Uncle Tom' figure who is subservient, servile and deferential. The name is derived from an 1852 abolitionist novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The phrase 'Uncle Tom' acquired negative connotations at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when large numbers of black southerners migrated to northern America but were unwelcome due to the increased competition for jobs and cultural differences. Northern blacks saw themselves as progressive and southern blacks as submissive. The *Defender*, a northern newspaper first used the phrase as a slur in 1910 to chastise a black woman from Georgia who set up a petition to introduce segregation to schools in Chicago (Spingarn, 2010). Extracts of the blog post below demonstrate how Frank Bruno is seen as the archetype of the emasculated black man:

He is not the best boxer Britain has produced... Nigel Benn, Chris Eubank and Lennox Lewis all had more grit, greater skill and reached higher heights – but the British public always loved Frank. But why? We all know that the 'great British public' prefer a gallant loser to an arrogant winner (see Tim Henman) but it goes deeper than that.

The humility, the [self-deprecating] humour, the ever-ready joke and yes the trademark laugh. Despite his size and strength white people can look on Frank

and think it's okay, we have nothing to fear here. Frank must have worked out how to do this quite early on in life. Remember he was expelled from school in his early teens for constant fighting. Physically large even then he must have been quite intimidating for his teachers. And yet years later this same man appeared in television adverts for HP sauce and starred in panto wearing a tutu.

As simple as he is, Frank knows that for a black man to get on in this country white people have to like you. (As my grandfather used to say “they hold the handle and you hold the blade”). With his imposing presence that took extra effort for him, so if it requires a little coon-ing and sambo-ing so be it. (Remember that Lennox Lewis called Frank an Uncle Tom to his face).

Just look at the black men who've succeeded in the media in this country – Mr Motivator, Lenny Henry, Ainsley Harriott, Andi Peters, all made careers out of being smiling and inoffensive...

But while I'm not dissing them I can't say that any of them make me feel proud to be black. Not in the way that self-confident, assertive black men, Muhammad Ali or Spike Lee or Usain Bolt does.

Luther (43, social commentary) makes the argument that Frank Bruno has not acquired popularity among the British public because of his boxing prowess – other black heavyweight boxers are judged as being more skilful and successful. Bruno is also not popular because he is a gallant loser. Bruno is popular because he exudes the Uncle Tom figure that makes white people feel safe. The implication is that given his large size, which was intimidating to teachers even at school age, he developed the emasculated black identity as a solution to the problem of ‘white fear’. Reference to the wearing of a tutu serves to illustrate the extent of Bruno's feminised persona. A sarcastic comment is made that Bruno is not an intelligent person but he is astute enough to know that success within British society is inextricably linked with popularity. The Jamaican proverb “they hold the handle and you hold the blade” was popularised through the lyrics of a song by a Jamaican Rocksteady group called the Heptones, *I hold the handle you hold the blade*. It is meant to symbolise ‘forced acquiescence’ (Crossed Crocodiles, 2008). Bruno is seen as a reluctant colluder with little choice but to play the part expected of him. The implication is that failure to comply will result in a hostile media and public. The number of black men offered as examples of emasculated males who have enjoyed successful careers in the media are held up to confirm

his hypothesis that this is the only type of black male identity that will ever be accepted. Uncle Tom figures like Bruno are regarded as a source of shame, in contrast to figures perceived as embodying a strong black male identity. This narrative highlights systems of power embedded in the mainstream media through which the representation of black male identity is controlled by the dominant culture by leveraging popularity and financial rewards in exchange for the suppression of black masculinity and male pride.

### **8.2.3 Representation of African Caribbean communities**

Adrian (30, social commentary) feels that misrepresentation of black communities is a particular problem that was amplified in media coverage of the UK riots in 2011:

I personally don't think the riots were a race issue. I think the problem was a class issue...A lot of the mainstream media was like let's look at black leaders and okay that's fine because Tottenham is a predominantly black area. But it's also a Turkish area, a Kurdish area and all the kids that were rioting were not all black. It really annoyed me that you were seeing all this stuff in the media and it's like they've clearly not done their research about what happened. The mainstream media is often quite lazy when it comes to these issues. It's like, let's just go for the easy target.

Extracts of his blog post below reveal an analysis of how the riots were racialised by the mainstream media, leading to the misrepresentation of black communities, culminating in black communities being blamed by for widespread social unrest:

The events that preceded the initial riots in Tottenham were the death of Mark Duggan and a subsequent peaceful protest on the Saturday afternoon before the rioting commenced. Several commentators attempted to make hurried and tenuous links between the peaceful protest and the rioting. However, there was no correlation between the aims of the initial protesters who sought answers over the death of Mark Duggan and the rioters who sought opportunistic destruction.

...any indignation of the rioters in Tottenham, and the locations of subsequent rioting, was not apparent. Nonetheless, a number of rioters and commentators claimed the death of Mark Duggan served as a tipping point for frustrations of

disaffected youth, particularly within the black community, and anger over racial profiling.

In the aftermath of the unrest, socio-economic, racial and generational tensions have all been opined as the cause of the riots along with wider community tensions with the police. Finding a neat social group by which the rioters can be identified appears to be much desired.

The extent of British multiculturalism has been apparent in the varied ethnic groups of the rioters. To suggest a link between race relations and the unrest is therefore a flawed assumption. Nonetheless, some commentators, both within and outside of the black community, have attempted to argue this case. However, historian David Starkey, in what were career-ending utterances on the BBC's *Newsnight*, went one step further.

Referencing Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech that criticised commonwealth immigration to Britain, David Starkey asserted "black culture" had been assumed by non-black rioters, effectively equating black culture with the nihilistic behaviour that was witnessed in several English cities. Conversely, claiming black Labour MP David Lammy's well-educated diction as that of a white person, he intimated white culture was the antithesis of all that had occurred with the unrest.

Needless to say, David Starkey's comments were unfounded and utterly racist, totally rejecting the many positive contributions the black diaspora, and those of other ethnic minority communities, has made to British society.

There was not a 'black' issue behind the riots. The issue of race relations, let alone one exclusive to the black community, was very much secondary, if at all applicable, to the cause of the riots.

This post makes the argument that whilst a peaceful protest over the death of Mark Duggan preceded the widespread riots that followed; the mainstream media were wrong to link the two, implying a racial dimension. As the riots spread across the country it should have been evident that the cause was not related to the death of Mark Duggan. Black communities were used as a scapegoat by the media looking for a facile explanation to present to the British public. Despite the fact that images in the media showed people of all ethnic groups



participating in the riots, historian David Starkey blamed black culture and by default black communities for the social disorder, linking this to a wider problem of mass immigration. Starkey's essentialist conceptualisation of black identity viewed from a white imperialist perspective equates formal English language with whiteness. This is exemplified by his appropriation of MP David Lammy as an example of a black male that embodies whiteness. By contrast, the informal language sometimes referred to as urban slang, is equated with black culture and viewed as illegitimate and inferior. Starkey's view is regarded as profoundly racist by ascribing negative traits on the basis of assumed white, cultural superiority. Whilst the media and commentators like David Starkey found it politically convenient to racialise the riots, race was not the cause. The participation of some black individuals in the riots only represented an incidental occurrence; of a small proportion of an ethnically diverse society that happened to be black, just as others who took part happened to be white, south Asian and Chinese.

Theoretical analysis of this post reveals the astuteness of the blogger's observations. In his examination of the relationship between racism, discourse and ideology, Van Dijk (2000b) argues that racist ideologies are reproduced through talk and text (as exemplified by Starkey's comments on prime time television). They are characterised by a strategy that seeks to ascribe negative attributes to racialised others, whilst presenting whites as victims. In the example above, white British society and culture are presented as victims of black culture that is linked with illiteracy, violence and social disorder. Racist ideologies often frame black communities as social problems, focusing on social differences which are presented as negative traits that threaten the stability of white British society. Carter et al (2010) argue that the British state has played a key role in the racialization of migration and in the construction of national identities, through which race is signified as a location of difference. Studies have shown that the mainstream media consistently produce negative and alarmist coverage of immigration issues that uncritically repeats and therefore perpetuates racist discourse by government ministers who use metaphorical terms like 'tides', 'floods' and 'swamping' (Law, 2002: 91).

### **8.3 Bloggers' perceptions of the social impact of blogging**

This section presents participants' perceptions of the social impact of their activities as bloggers on African Caribbean communities and the wider society. The aim here is to understand the degree of importance they attach to social impact and to reveal their

perceptions on the level of social impact their blogs generate. Given the significance of voice, visibility and empowerment as motivational factors linked to issues of race and representation for some participants, understanding these perceptions adds another important dimension to this study. Ascertaining the importance of social impact to the participants can point to whether wider aims and objectives of blogging beyond personal gratification exist. Blogs that are linked to social aims can be regarded as externally focused, whilst those without clearly identifiable social aims can be viewed as internally focused. Whilst previous research has defined externally focused blogs as those focused on party politics and filter blogs, both predominantly authored by white males (Chen, 2012; Gregg, 2006; Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Herring et al, 2004; Pedersen 2008), it is argued here that blogs with social aims beyond personal gratification, should be seen as externally focused with the potential for initiating social change, especially where discursive activism and counterhegemonic practice, as evidenced in the previous chapter, are involved in blogging practice. However, the purpose of this chapter is not to discuss the effectiveness of blogs as a medium for collective advocacy and deliberation, which is the focus of chapter seven. The key objective is to capture the perspectives and perceptions of the participants, centering and privileging their voices as CRT praxis and further to capture the *subjectivity* of the bloggers, defined as ‘the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world’ (Weedon, 1987:32). The majority of participants (81%) said it is important for them to feel that their blogs are making a difference in society. The areas of social impact discussed fall broadly within two realms. The first is providing inspiration to others, and the second is providing personal insights and alternative perspectives that are seen as contributing towards social change by generating new levels of understanding and/or by changing attitudes and perceptions.

### **8.3.1 Inspiring others**

Inspiring others is the social aim most articulated by participants, some of whom have clearly identifiable groups of people that are the focus of their attention. Chioma (48, race gender and politics) hopes to inspire young black women through her blog:

I don't think there's any kind of major role models in this country for young black girls. I feel their invisibility. Sometimes I look at them on the street and I'm thinking who is their role model? There's no creativity. If I could impact some

young girl about writing...especially black girls that would be a real great thing for me, definitely.

Having expressed her own feelings of being voiceless and invisible as a black woman in British society in the previous chapter, her concern here is for the upcoming generation of young black women, who as a consequence of symbolic annihilation are lacking role models. She hopes that she can somehow reach these young women through her blog and encourage creativity and writing. This is a clearly identifiable social aim towards a specific group in society that demonstrates an external focus of blogging linked to a desire to improve the experience of African Caribbean people in Britain.

Beverley (32, social commentary) also hopes to inspire young African women:

I tend to do a lot of stuff on women, so I like to be able to show African women as people who are doing things for themselves. I want to reflect the positive side of being an African woman. There are women that are doing good things and women can inspire or aspire to be like them. Like the 10 young Nigerian women that I profiled...they are all under 30 but some of them have already got their PhD. I want a young girl who may not have a lot going for her right now to read that and her self-esteem rises and she thinks actually I could do something similar to this.

The social aim of the blog—to inspire young African women, has been carefully considered to the point of producing specific content to highlight successful African women as a source of inspiration. There is a clear objective to promote self-esteem and aspiration among young African women, which is both externally focused and linked to a clear aim of initiating social change.

Gloria (327, arts and culture) who is motivated by a need to address the marginalisation of black creativity, expresses similar sentiments about inspiring the next generation:

I really want to share the work that I have on the blog with black students who are interested in taking up art and design as a career, because I don't think it's really encouraged that much in Africa. I think that in terms of what my generation can do to inspire the next generation; I feel that it's important that if you do have a

platform that you use it wisely. I feel it's important for bloggers who are black and have a platform. We're using the technology that's up and coming and that is what people are following to use as a tool to connect with the next generation. I think it's quite important to do that.

This is a clearly articulated aim to inspire a younger generation of black art and design students, using the blog as a tool to showcase the work of black designers as a means of inspiration. She recognizes that young people are engaged with new technology and sees blogs as a useful medium to reach this group. Her repeated use of the word 'important' emphasizes the significance she attaches to this role.

For Nancy (33, career and lifestyle) motivated by the need to address the under-representation of black mothers in the mainstream and challenge negative stereotypes, she hopes to be an inspiration to other black mothers:

When I first started [blogging] a few people said to me, you're an inspiration; you're a mum of three, how do you find time to do these many posts? Even though it's only one or two people who have said it, it's making a difference because they're looking at me and saying I'm an inspiration to them. Through what I'm doing they can see that yes, you can do it if you put your mind to it.

Through the process of self-representation, she offers herself as a positive role model of an entrepreneurial mother of three and in doing so aims to inspire other mothers through her own example. The positive feedback she has already received clearly serves as a motivating factor to maintain the social aims and external focus of the blog.

Jennifer (28, business) who sees her blog as part of her business strategy expresses similar sentiments about inspiring other black women:

I found it very difficult when I first started my business identifying black women who were mothers who ran businesses. I decided okay, I feel this way; maybe there are other mothers that feel the same way that might be isolated in the location that they are. I want to be part of a movement where we're unifying again. It's really important to me as a mother in business that I'm unifying women and showing women it can be done. That's the whole point behind it; that

means a lot to me. It's to encourage women to get into that environment, to show it can be done.

Through her own experience of feeling isolated as a black businesswoman, she has identified a specific social aim of bringing black businesswomen together through her blog. Her use of words such as 'movement' and 'unifying' emphasizes the great significance she attaches to this role. There is a clear intention to encourage black women into business through the use of her blog as a tool of inspiration. Use of the word 'again' suggests that she is trying to recapture something she feels has been lost, or eroded. She sees her blog as a medium for engagement with other women as well as a tool for inspiration. Black women are oppressed by controlling images of black motherhood such as the mammy, the matriarch and the welfare mother. However, black motherhood enables black women to define, evaluate and articulate their own experiences, whether positive or negative, engendering self-respect, independence and empowerment (Collins, 1990). In seeking to inspire, motivate and empower black mothers through their blogs, both Nancy (33, career and lifestyle) and Jennifer (28, business) embody the concept of 'community othermothers'; black women who make important contributions to their communities through 'connectedness with others', organising and nurturing black communities in ways that build common interests and inspire community activism (Collins, 1990). The very act of blogging as mothers has been defined as radical, since even when writing about everyday issues, 'mommy bloggers' often challenge stereotypical depictions of motherhood perpetuated in the mainstream media. Thus: 'Mommy blogging challenges and reinterprets representations of motherhood' (Lopez, 2009:730).

### **8.3.2 Providing personal insights and alternative perspectives**

Nadine (31, wedding and bridal) explains that her social aims are targeted both at black women and the wider society:

Part of the blog is to be a service for black brides to be, to say that you're not alone, we get married too. It's a strong message that I want to push out there. In terms of making a difference to society, I just feel like some of the mainstream magazines, if you look through them you would think that black people didn't get married. What kind of message is that sending? I'd like to think that it makes people that aren't so aware of the black community, that it kind of changes the perception a little bit. I think it's making an impact [on] people who maybe don't

have much interaction with black people who will look at it and think they're just like us, they get married too.

This is a clearly articulated aim to generate visibility for black brides-to-be to enhance their experience of getting married and to offer a range of resources. But there is also a wider objective expressed here to promote positive images of African Caribbean women to the wider society. The absence of black women as brides-to-be is deemed as implying by default, that marriage is not important within the black community. She hopes that by focusing her content on black brides that this will help to address the shortcomings of the mainstream media by changing people's perceptions of African Caribbean communities.

Other participants are explicit in articulating the importance of social aims to them as bloggers, although they do not have such a specific group of people in mind. However, what they do express is a perception of *how* they can make a difference in society. So for Michaela (44, business) who cultivates a black audience, blogs provide a creative means of disseminating alternative viewpoints:

I feel that we can make a difference in life in a very creative way. It doesn't have to be through a political way. I just feel that people are controlled to think a certain way, so an alternative viewpoint is really important.

There is a clear social aim articulated here to challenge the dominance of traditionally conceptualized political action as a means of initiating social change. As an alternative approach she uses the creative medium of blogs as a platform for disseminating counterhegemonic discourse. Counterhegemonic discourses are often produced unintentionally (Warf & Grimes, 1997) and through experimental content (Bailey et al, 2008).

For Leona (29, arts and culture, Africa) her social aims are linked to providing useful insights and information to promote new ways of thinking about people and society:

As idealistic as it sounds, I do want to make a positive change for the place that I come from and the people I relate to. So it's very important that people are getting value that's helping them to see things differently, or make a positive change in their life...that is extremely important to me. I think... it's putting new

ideas or ways of thinking out there or giving exposure to things that people might not have thought about or come across. I think the human element is really valuable in terms of bloggers. By sharing what they've learned or challenges they've overcome, that can inspire others who might be in similar situations.

Reference to 'the place that I come from and people I relate to' indicate that her social aims are directed towards people of African descent. Earlier in this chapter her intended audience was revealed as people from Africa and the Diaspora. Her social aims are clearly focused on providing useful insights and information that is largely absent from the mainstream media. She regards personalized, experience-based knowledge as being of immense importance in providing inspiration.

For the Roberta (23, fashion, hair and beauty) whose gratification is linked to knowledge sharing, her social aim is more directed at individuals and is articulated more in terms of social change as a bonus, rather than as a primary objective:

It's a good feeling to know that someone's reading my blog and that they've gotten help or good advice or good information from something that I've written, or of it's had a positive effect on them in terms of making a decision they've been trying to make for a while. I'm not trying to change the world with my blog or anything but it's a good feeling if someone takes something away from my blog.

Others express similar sentiments with regard to knowledge sharing as an important social aim that is not the primary objective, but still seen as significant. For Fumi (29, creative writing) who developed her blog into a fictional series featuring Nigerian characters, her social aims are linked to education and inspiration:

If I can educate someone or inspire someone then that would make me really happy. It would make me feel like it's worthwhile that it's not just something I do for myself, it's something I do for someone else to get something out of it. I've had people comment, I've had people contact me and things like that make me feel like my blog is actually useful and inspiring.

Speaking in terms of helping others clearly indicates an external focus of the blog. There are clear social aims, whilst not the primary objectives, to educate and inform her audiences.

Even where social aims are not regarded as a primary objective of blogging and where sharing useful insights and perspectives are deemed by the participants as helping others, this can still have a wider impact in society than intended. Research by Wells and Rainie (2008) reveals that the internet often substitutes for family and friends when it comes to solving personal problems. Their findings suggest that for two out of seven important decisions and situations faced, people use the internet to find solutions more than they turn to family and friends. Whilst the type of medium on the internet is not specified, one can assume that this would include blogs. There is no suggestion that the internet is a replacement for friends and family but rather that it is a medium that people with broadband access are increasingly turning to, in order to extend their search for information. This suggests with particular reference to the bloggers here who hope that their blogs can have a social impact by providing useful insights, alternative perspectives or information absent from the mainstream, that they may indeed be fulfilling an important role within the blogosphere.

#### **8.4 Conclusion**

This chapter reveals that the majority of bloggers attach importance to divulging their racial and ethnic identity for three main purposes: authenticity, challenging negative stereotypes and as a means of self and community representation. A minority of participants feel that when their posts are targeted at African Caribbean audiences there is a need to demonstrate they are qualified to speak on black issues by virtue of their lived experiences. While some of the participants cultivate racially and ethnically diverse audiences, many of them feel that their content, focused on African Caribbean people is more likely to attract black audiences who more readily empathise with their experiences and perspectives. Those seeking to challenge negative stereotypes deem it of particular importance to divulge their racial identity in order to utilise self-representation as a strategy. The limitations of blogging openly as an African Caribbean person is linked to an awareness of the dominance of whiteness in the blogosphere that results in an assumption that black people blog about 'black' issues. This is seen as limiting in terms of attracting wide readership. This chapter also reveals that participants have concerns about the representation of men, women and black communities in the mainstream media. Many construct posts in response to stories that are considered misrepresentative of African Caribbean people. Their posts offer personalised analysis and critiques of mainstream representation, putting forth alternative viewpoints. Others simply highlight when positive stories do appear in the mainstream, while making an underlying



political statement about representation. The narratives of the women in this study suggest they do not define themselves according to dominant, stereotypical constructions. They deploy a form of resistance that is centred on actions that are oppositional to the 'confines of race, class and gender oppression (Collins, 1990:93). Most of the participants attach importance to social aims. The two key social aims articulated are inspiring others and providing personal insights and alternative perspectives. While some have clearly identifiable groups of people in mind, for others social aims are not the primary objectives but still seen as an important aspect of blogging. In appropriating blogs as a platform for highlighting black female achievement, the women bloggers disrupt dominant ideologies that perpetuate stereotypical representations of black women.

The findings of this chapter suggest that there is a shared perception among some of the participants with some African American bloggers on the need to blog openly on issues of concern to African Caribbean communities in the UK as a moral obligation, termed *blogging while black*. The majority of bloggers clearly articulate social aims whether or not these are the primary objective. This demonstrates objectives that go beyond personal gratification and which are linked to a desire to initiate social change, largely within African Caribbean communities, but also extended to the wider society.

This chapter concludes the qualitative findings of the study based on interviews with the participants. However, as explained in section 5.4, I have several years' experience of blogging that has furnished me with unique insights and perspectives that are of relevance to all of the research questions. The next chapter therefore draws on and analyses these perspectives which are presented as an autoethnography. While they follow the same areas of inquiry that are covered in chapters seven and eight, they are presented through the constructed narratives of multiple others in order to expose the complex nature of blogging identities.

## Chapter 9: Personal Reflections on Blogging

This chapter represents a fusion of critical ethnography, defined as a ‘conscious-raising process’ with ‘emancipatory intent’ that aims to challenge the status quo and involves ‘empirical investigations of everyday, lived cultural reality’ (Foley, 2002:472), and autoethnography. The latter has evolved from postmodern philosophy as a challenge to the dominant scientific paradigm that privileges neutrality and objectivity to legitimise alternative epistemologies that employ varied forms of inquiry and knowledge production (Wall, 2006). It is defined broadly as ‘cultural analysis through personal narrative’ (Boylorn & Orbe, 2013: 17), where culture is conceptualised as ‘pluralistic, subjective, personal and potentially inclusive’ (Boylorn & Orbe, 2013: 15). In this chapter I employ autoethnography through the use of a personalised narrative in some sections of this chapter, to draw on my five years’ experience of blogging using my subjective selves as sources of data, contextualised with extracts of published blog posts, analysed in the third person. While this approach represents a break with academic convention, since researchers are not generally expected to include themselves in the presentation of findings (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1997); the aim of this approach is to capture the cultural experience of blogging in a broader social context. As a member of the group being studied as a blogger of African descent, I have experiences, insights and histories that are of relevance to the study. Section 4.4 of this thesis documents how blogging informs the overall research process using virtual ethnography, cyberethnography and autobiographical ethnography. This chapter extends that process by presenting my own personal reflections of the specific dimensions of blogging covered in chapters six and seven, which comprise the voices of the participants. The decision to present my reflection on blogging in a separate chapter to the other bloggers is based on a desire to suspend my own perspectives in order to privilege and centre the voices of the participants, drawing on my scholarly and experiential knowledge in the analysis and interpretation of their narratives. I make no claims of neutrality, objectivity or emotional distance in presenting the findings this way, since I share the view that no researcher is devoid of axiological influences (Humphries et al, 2000; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). But in adopting an approach that fuses critical ethnography with critical autoethnography through writing in the third person in some sections is used as a reflexive technique for analysing the self as the other. Presenting my reflections on blogging in this chapter is driven by pragmatism—separating two different methodological approaches allows me the freedom to express my author’s voice, which in the context of this thesis ‘is one more source of insight

from which readers can construct images of the goings on' (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1997: 296). In the first section of this chapter I offer a brief summary of critical ethnography and critical autoethnography. In sections two to five I present personal reflections on motivation, gratification, identity, representation and social impact through the narratives of three distinct subjective selves that represent my multiple blogging identities: the Activist, the Academic and the Fortysomething. This approach has been adopted to reflect multiple layers of consciousness (Ellis & Bochner, 2003) enabling the use of a reflexive technique where the self is conceptualised as the other (Foley, 2002) using multiple voices (Magnet, 2006), 'multiple standpoints and positionalities' (Boylorn, 2013: 77). Extracts of blog posts are also utilised to aid reflection and to offer verifiable sources of information. The findings of this chapter are summarised in section six.

### **9.1 Critical ethnography and critical autoethnography**

During his experimental quest to develop a more accessible and engaging form of ethnography that is critical, political and emancipatory, Foley (2002) has identified four different types of reflexivity, regarded as a key component of critical ethnography. *Confessional*, is where the self is conceptualised as the 'other', defined as 'a multiple, constructed self that is always becoming and never quite fixed' (Foley, 2002:473). *Theoretical*, refers to 'a reasonably objective, authoritative account of the cultural other' more aligned with traditional ethnography (Foley, 2002: 476). *Textual*, describes the rhetorical use of representational practices in challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about truth and fact. *Deconstructive* refers to the dismantling of a hierarchy of ideas in mainstream discourses, often through the use of evocative text. Through these different forms of reflexivity, what emerges is a 'quasi-scientific, abductive epistemology' that uses 'introspection, intuition and emotion' to 'explain the lived reality of cultural others' (Foley, 2002:487). Critical ethnographers are motivated by the desire to undertake qualitative research that exposes exploitation and inequality and they often incorporate autoethnographic practices into the presentation of their findings. These social and political aims are totally consistent with my emancipatory approach to this research project as detailed in chapter two, and offer an additional, innovative method through which to answer the research questions. The four different types of reflexivity outlined by Foley (2002) provide an opportunity for experimentation with different types of discourse in the presentation of the findings. More recently, critical autoethnography has been identified as an especially useful approach for dealing with issues of identity and diversity through its potential to "give voice" to

previously silenced and marginalised experiences’ (Boylorn & Orbe, 2013: 15). It facilitates the exploration of multiple identities and ‘intersectional experiences of difference’ (Boylorn & Orbe, 2013:18), using autoethnography as an approach to research the self in relation to others.

## **9.2 Reflection on motivation and gratification**

In section 4.4 of this thesis I allude to the fact that I have worked as a professional journalist since 2002 and as a journalism lecturer since 2008. It would be fair to say that my interest in the news media stems from a desire to expose injustice and inequality and especially to uncover the myriad of ways that race and racism impact the lives of ethnic minority groups in the UK. This is largely a consequence of being born in London in the 1960s and for almost five decades bearing first hand witness to the way that the British state and the news media construct mainstream racist discourse that wields immense hegemonic power. My role as a journalist represents ideological struggles against the marginalisation experienced through constantly being de-centred by whiteness and against subtle linguistic ideologies that perpetuate racism, as detailed in section 2.4 of this thesis. By 2008 I had gained six years’ journalism experience writing largely for publications targeting African Caribbean audiences. I had gained a bachelor’s degree in journalism, a postgraduate certificate in teaching in higher education and I entered academia as a sessional lecturer, teaching journalism practice to mature students at a London university. This is the context in which my foray into the blogosphere in December 2008 is situated. However, this only represents one dimension of my subjective self, which I will call ‘The Activist’. In May 2011, around six months into my PhD studentship I developed another subjective self in seeking voice and visibility as a developing academic. I will refer to this second subjective self as ‘The Academic’. Finally, in July 2013 I created a new blog called *Lifestyle Challenge*, in which a third subjective self emerged in the form of a black woman over 40 seeking to enhance her physical health and wellbeing. This subjective self will be called ‘The Fortysomething’.

### **9.2.1 Motivation: The Activist**

The first blog post written by the Activist (Gabriel, 2008) published in the social commentary section of her blog, located on her personal website, is a reliable indicator of her main motivation for blogging at that time. Entitled *European ruling on DNA has major implications for the black community*; it used a legal ruling by the European Court prohibiting the retention of the DNA and fingerprints of innocent people, as an opportunity to discuss

racial disparities in the criminal justice system. It was an issue she had been following with interest for a long time and had previously written articles on this topic as a journalist. Motivation for the Activist is linked to the need to maintain a journalistic voice within the public sphere in order to articulate the experiences of African Caribbean people and to address perceived shortcomings in the mainstream media. Below is an extract from this post:

Black people in the UK are over-represented throughout the criminal justice system, but especially so on the DNA register. By the government's own predictions, by 2010, half of all black British males will have their DNA retained on the database.

This is in stark contrast to the predicted 14.4% of the white male population whose records are expected to be held on the register in two years' time. The disproportionate retention of DNA material from black communities has unsurprisingly raised serious concerns.

Black people are already six times more likely to be stopped and searched and six times more likely to be arrested. In an article I wrote for the Parliamentary Monitor last year I argued that this type of discrimination is part of a wider process of structured and systemised forms of racial discrimination and disadvantage.

This is fast becoming a totalitarian state with the introduction of ID cards for all UK citizens looming. But who do you think will be stopped on the street most frequently and asked to prove their identity – the visible minorities: black, Asian, Chinese communities and anyone who is not of white European appearance.

This post argues that the disproportionate number of African Caribbean people on the DNA database not charged with any crime is symptomatic of an institutionally racist criminal justice system. This is achieved by providing examples of other racial disparities such as stop and search and arrests. Voice and visibility are clearly major motivations for blogging in terms of maintaining a journalistic presence in the media to articulate the experiences of African Caribbean people in British society. This post also represents counterhegemonic practice in challenging mainstream discourse. Few if any articles in the mainstream media covering this story would have linked it with wider issues around the impact of race on criminal justice in the UK. The blog therefore serves an important purpose in providing an

alternative viewpoint. This represents extrinsic motivations in common with many of the participants, linked to issues of race and representation. However, the Activist sees her efforts as part of a wider mission to try and engender what Freire (1974) terms *conscientizacao*, or critical consciousness. This is defined as self-awareness of multiple forms of oppression and the ability to act against oppressive elements within society. For Freire, education is a tool of liberation; for the Activist, the blog functions as a platform for disseminating knowledge as an educational strategy which has liberatory potential.

### 9.2.2 Motivation: The Academic

Whilst the motivations of the Academic are also linked to voice and visibility in common with the Activist and are also extrinsic, the point of departure is the content and overall purpose of this category of the blog. Up to this point, her identity has been defined for several years as a journalist, for which she has established a strong reputation. As a first year PhD student, she is now grappling with a new professional identity in a new field, where she is also seeking to master a new set of skills. The PhD category of the blog serves a dual purpose of developing a public persona as an academic, whilst simultaneously utilising the blog as a reflexive tool as part of the learning process. This is demonstrated in an extract of her first blog post (Gabriel, 2011a):

My PhD supervisor asked me what the difference between methods and methodology was several months ago and I did not know the answer. All I could muster in a pathetic response was a look of bewilderment. Thankfully, I was referred to a book by Peter Clough and Cathy Nutbrown called *A Student's Guide to Methodology*, which I would recommend to all PhD students and candidates.

My problem, as I have since discovered is that I was too busy thinking about my literature review and undertaking all my reading under the misguided notion that methodology was something to be looked at later on. How wrong I was!

Having read Clough and Nutbrown I now acknowledge that methods and methodology should be right up there in terms of priority as a starting point for any PhD research project. Understanding the difference between methods and methodology is of paramount importance.

In the above extract the Academic introduces herself to her new audience as a scholar clearly at the early stages of a doctoral research project. She shares her lack of knowledge with her audience, adding context in explaining why she was mystified by the difference between methods and methodology. In providing the solution to the problem the post becomes both reflexive to the Academic and educational to the audience.

### **9.2.3 Motivation: The Fortysomething**

Motivation to blog by the Fortysomething is linked to a need to establish voice and visibility within a personal, rather than professional context and driven by a perceived absence of black women over forty within the public sphere. As demonstrated in the following extract of her first blog post (Gabriel, 2011b) the style of writing is autobiographical, informal and personal, in contrast to the Activist and the Academic:

One of the main reasons why it has taken me so long to wear my hair in its natural, afro-textured state is because I honestly thought that I did not have ‘good hair.’ I always believed ‘good hair’ meant hair that was long, thick or glossy – sometimes all three – but my hair never fit that description!

It’s hardly surprising as in my childhood I was a real tomboy and had no interest in my hair whatsoever! By the time I entered my teens my hair was always dry and very fine. In order get the afro that was popular at that time I used to have to go to the barbers for a cut as my hair would flop in the middle otherwise!

When the afro fell out of fashion it seemed I had no option but to get a relaxer as I simply did not have ‘good’ enough hair to wear it natural, or so I believed. If only I knew then what I know now, I can only marvel at the length my hair would be!

When I went completely natural in May 2011 after transitioning under weaves and braids (whilst I decided what to do with my hair) I hadn’t yet discovered the natural hair channels on YouTube or read *The Science of Black Hair* and *Grow It*.

I had never heard of a hair care regimen and the only way I felt able to control my hair was to blow-dry it after washing and then to use ceramic straightening tongs.

I soon got fed up of straightening my hair every day and that's when I started doing some research

Of course the whole 'good hair' thing is a fallacy – the idea that only a select few are endowed with good quality hair which is always attributed to mixed heritage a few generations back! The truth is that with knowledge and understanding any black woman can have healthy hair – and healthy hair is good hair.

This extract reveals that the Fortysomething seeks to establish a personal relationship with her audience. This is apparent through her autobiographical style of writing in which she shares childhood experiences and perceptions about the quality of her hair. The tone is conversational as though a group of women were sitting together and reminiscing about the past whilst sharing solutions to the present. The blog functions as a platform for enacting an individual and collective identity as a black woman over 40 sharing information and experiences around health and beauty issues. The implicit need to create a sense of community amongst black women over 40, giving them a strong collective voice is also linked to psychological empowerment (Stavrositu, 2007; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012).

### **9.3 Gratification: The Activist**

Gratification for the Activist is largely derived through the act of voicing in providing alternative perspectives on the experience of African Caribbean people in British society, especially around issues of race and racism. However, there is also a secondary, intersecting factor related to knowledge sharing. As a professional journalist using her blog as a platform for counterhegemonic practice and to offer alternative viewpoints; this can be regarded as campaigning journalism and for the purpose of gratification be categorised as sharing professional knowledge. As discussed in section 8.2, the Activist seeks to engender critical consciousness by using the blog as an educational strategy. The act of voicing and knowledge sharing are interconnected and intersecting factors linked to gratification.

#### **9.3.1 Gratification: The Academic**

Given the similarities between the Activist and the Academic in maintaining a professional public identity for the former and establishing a new professional identity for the latter, it is unsurprising that voice and knowledge sharing should manifest as intersecting factors linked to gratification. However, although the two subjective selves both use the blog as an



educational strategy; whilst the Activist seeks to engender critical consciousness in her readers, the Academic seeks to encourage critical thinking skills amongst her perceived audience of students. In common with some of the other participants as detailed in chapter four; feedback works in conjunction with voice and knowledge sharing as a blended experience. It is an important dimension of gratification as it lets the Academic know that her perceived student audience are learning through her blog posts. According to the Academic, *methods and methodology* is one of the most popular post in the PhD category with almost 15,000 hits and has received numerous comments, one of which reads:

I think it's excellent writing. Short but meaningful, while many have failed to address these two terms in such a simple manner. However, I would like you to explain more about quantitative methods. Thanks

For the Academic, the comment is an indicator that her posts are reaching her intended audience who find them useful enough to request further information on related topics and helps to increase the sense of satisfaction from blogging.

### **9.3.2 Gratification: The Fortysomething**

For the Fortysomething writing about fashion, hair, beauty, diet, exercise and wellbeing, gratification is linked both to knowledge sharing and social interaction as a blended experience. In common with other participants blogging on similar topics as detailed in chapter four; the Fortysomething defines the knowledge she imparts on her blog as experiential and based on personal experience, as opposed to expert knowledge. In seeking to establish an intimate relationship with her audience in order to enact an individual and collective identity, she uses the blog as a conversational space and medium for generating knowledge that she deems of interest to other black women of a similar age. In common with other participants, feedback extends the level of gratification by creating a sense of community and by facilitating the flow and exchange of ideas, as a comment posted on the blog in response to the post referenced in section 8.2.3 demonstrates:

Thanks for this post, I have been natural for almost 10 years and it never grew more than 4 inches, I wore it in braids mostly and wrapped it in the winter. I was looking for different ways to wrap my hair on the internet and stumbled across you tube and the Black Hair Community. Just by changing my cleansing routine, and having a better understanding of what I put on my hair it has grown. Length

was never an issue for me just hair in good condition, now 8 months after gaining this knowledge my hair is in great condition and it is growing well.

This commenter demonstrates that she enjoyed reading the post and was also motivated to share her own experience with the Fortysomething. By sharing her experience the commenter extends the cycle of learning and the commenter's reference to 'The Black Hair Community' also evokes a sense of belonging and collective identity.

#### **9.4 Reflection on racial and ethnic identity in online spaces**

'Blogging while black' is a term frequently used in a US context (Rabb, 2005) that denotes a moral obligation by people of African descent to blog openly on issues of concern to black communities, using blogs as a platform for discursive activism. Determining whether such perceptions exist within the UK amongst African Caribbean bloggers is one of the aims of this research project examined in chapter seven through the perspectives of the participants. I judge it to be of equal importance to reveal my own perceptions about racial and ethnic identity in the blogosphere, hence the inclusion in this chapter. Accordingly, in this section, the Activist, Academic and Fortysomething each reflect on the importance they attach to audiences knowing their racial and ethnic identity and the impact of race on the cultivation of audiences. These are presented as personal narratives as opposed to the third person accounts presented in section 8.2. The rationale for using the first person in this section is to accommodate greater fluidity, hindsight and the inclusion of epiphanies to extend the narratives beyond extracts from blog posts.

##### **9.4.1 Reflection on racial and ethnic identity in online spaces: The Activist**

On the blog page of my personal website, my blog posts are featured in a category called *social commentary*. These posts are shaped by personal opinion, a necessary step in advancing an alternative viewpoint to the mainstream and to facilitate creative freedom. However, they are also well-researched, often including an historical context generally absent from mainstream news articles. I view these posts as 'quasi-journalistic', to borrow a term from Hall (2005) and view myself as a campaigning journalist who uses her blog as an alternative tool of the trade. I occasionally write articles for the mainstream media which I consider to be equally representative of campaigning journalism. In 2013, for example, I had three articles published in the *Independent* and one in the *Guardian Higher Education Network* on the topic of race equality in higher education. Race usually features in my

campaigning articles, whether they are published in the mainstream or on my blog. How does this affect my perception of my constructed identity as the Activist in racial terms? My involvement with the news media over the past 11 years means that I can easily be located via an online internet search where my profiles, complete with images are there for all to survey. Therefore it is not something I really had to consider when I established my blog. But I have always made a conscious effort to manage my online presence and freely supply my own profile photos for various media and organisations where I have an online profile, such as Research Councils UK and the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement. In analysing the rationale for choosing to present my racial identity in online spaces, the two main reasons are linked to self and community representation and challenging negative stereotypes. Since I frequently write quasi-journalistic articles about the experiences of African Caribbean people in Britain, it is important to me that this is undertaken from the position as a member of this group. I see this positioning as a strategy for reclaiming a representational space in which African Caribbean people are generally marginalised and de-centred by whiteness. So self-representation and community representation occur simultaneously, giving voice and visibility to African Caribbean communities in the UK, allowing us to speak for ourselves. Within the mainstream media, even where there are good intentions, the outcomes can be problematic. Earlier this year I was interviewed for an article in the *Independent* (Morgan, 2013) on the subject of race equality in higher education in the UK. I supplied three paragraphs outlining the problems and made a set of recommendations. However, in the published article only one short paragraph was used, which stated the obvious – that racism does exist, but the reasons outlined for the persistence of racial inequalities and proposed solutions were omitted. As I subsequently relayed to the reporter, the irony was not lost on me that in an article seeking to highlight racial disparities in academia, African Caribbean academics were represented as one-dimensional victims of racism not able to advance solutions to their problems. My frankness resulted in an offer to write a follow-up article (which turned into three articles). This example highlights a wider issue regarding mainstream representation; that is the importance of having an *effective* voice (Couldry, 2010) one that is seen and heard in its totality and not muted by dominant neo-liberal discourses. Whilst my blog posts may not reach the sizeable audiences of the mainstream news media, I at least have an effective voice. So, to conclude, yes, it is of paramount importance that my audiences know that I am an African Caribbean woman journalist/blogger. It is of equal importance that my racial and ethnic identity is seen to exist alongside other identities that include gender, class, age, professional and other identities

from which I am speaking at a particular point in time. In terms of my cultivated audiences, as a quasi-journalistic blogger/campaigning journalist, I am always seeking the widest possible audience since social change does not come through preaching to the converted. My social commentary is aimed at all races/ethnicities, genders etc. since I am seeking to advance perspectives not often found in the mainstream. Although one of my aims is to engender critical consciousness, this is targeted at all racially oppressed groups and not just African Caribbean people, since Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities for example, experience racism in the UK in similar ways.

#### **9.4.2 Reflection on racial and ethnic identity in online spaces: The Academic**

I see my academic blog as serving three important purposes to support my development as an emerging academic. Firstly, it functions as a reflexive learning tool that encourages me to reflect on my experiences through my journey from inception to completion of a doctorate. Secondly, it supports the learning of aspiring PhD students, new PhD students or master's students thinking of embarking on a doctoral research project (through conversational/experiential learning). Thirdly, it helps to promote my public profile as an academic, establishing me as a member of the academic community in the UK. Whilst many would not see a racial dimension here, I find it necessary to consider the racial implications, not purely on an individual level, but on a collective level. Therefore I do attach importance to audiences knowing my racial identity. It is important in terms of self and community representation and in terms of challenging negative stereotypes. Black academics (those that make up the Black British population in the UK using Census categories of Black African, Black Caribbean and Black Other) account for a mere 1.6% of all academics in the UK. This is a tiny minority who are largely invisible, especially given that they are spread across the UK, often finding themselves isolated and marginalised. This makes voice and visibility of immense importance. Although I am a postgraduate research student, my voice and visibility as a black academic is still of some significance. Even as an academic blogger, I am not only representing myself, but also the black academic community. I also feel that it is important to represent African Caribbean communities as a black academic, given the preponderance of stereotypical representations of African Caribbean people in the mainstream media as sporting heroes and entertainers but rarely as intellectuals. Black women are especially marginalised within academia due to the intersection of race and gender that is not addressed through race equality or gender equality measures. Whilst there are only 85 black professors in the UK out of 18,510, only 15 are women. So in perceiving of myself as a black female

academic and presenting myself as raced and gendered, I am acknowledging the multiple facets of my identity and generating visibility for black women in academia. However, in terms of my audiences, whilst it is important for them to acknowledge me as a black female academic, and some of the posts in the ‘academia’ category do deal with issues of race, I seek to cultivate a multiracial audience. The knowledge and experience that I share on my blog are aimed largely at a student audience that is not determined by race or ethnicity. Whilst some of the posts deal with issues of race I feel it is important that people of all races/ethnicities are informed and educated on the experiences of black academics in the UK.

#### **9.4.3 Reflection on racial and ethnic identity in online spaces: The Fortysomething**

I set up my *Lifestyle Challenge* blog as I saw little in the way of mainstream representation of black women over 40; which I felt equally applied to the blogosphere. I came across numerous hair and beauty and fashion blogs authored by black women in their twenties and thirties clearly targeting these age groups, but the 40+ group were simply invisible. With less than three years to my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, I felt an overhaul was needed to reflect my inner youthfulness externally. So I endeavoured to research ways of changing my lifestyle, experimenting with new hairstyles and clothes and thought it would be fun to blog about my experiences. Having joined an online forum for black women where I gained a great sense of community and established a group for women over 40 which very quickly grew to over 100 members; I felt there was a ready audience in the blogosphere. Since black women rarely feature in mainstream magazines, we have to create our own spaces where we can write about issues of particular relevance to us as black women. Whilst some of the topics I write about are not race-specific such as diet and exercise and fashion, when I write about hair, afro-textured hair is unique in texture and requires special care and management. Over the last five years a sizeable online community of black female bloggers and vloggers has emerged through which black women have become educators by sharing their experiential knowledge on what products and routines promote healthy, natural hair. Whilst my racial and ethnicity identity is of little relevance on articles about fashion, diet and exercise, it becomes significant when writing about black women’s hair. Visual images are really important, hence the growth of the natural hair community on YouTube, but even on blogs photos are a common feature. So authenticity is one of the primary reasons that I have an ‘about me’ page on my blog complete with a photo of myself and every blog post has at least one feature image, usually of a black female. It is important that we define ourselves in our own image. Black women seek knowledge, mutual understanding, inspiration and support from and

through each other within a community oriented space. The other important factor for presenting my racial identity on my blog is linked to self and community representation. Since black women are a rarity in the mainstream and black women over 40 are also a minority within the blogosphere, it is important to me to represent this group and help to generate voice and visibility. In terms of my targeted audience, whilst some of my posts are race-neutral as earlier stated, I am seeking to cultivate an audience of predominantly black women over 40 like myself. It's about creating our own spaces, sharing a collective identity and promoting mutual support. It does seem to be working. One of my earlier posts titled: *Can black women over 40 grow afro textured hair long?* (Gabriel, 2011c) has received 17 comments from women over 40, the oldest being 62. There is a great sense of a shared identity, shared experiences and sisterhood. One of the comments reads:

I just wanted to drop you a line and tell you THANK YOU THANK YOU. I am a black woman over 40 with natural hair looking for information regarding hair care/styles for women over 40 and I think I found it here. I have found an inspiration from your website and this article that I feel it's time for me to create my blog and vlog. I have been on YouTube for three months and finally went to Bing and put in search word and luckily clicked on your site. There's not much out there for older women but I will change that as well as you have. Thank you for the inspiration and information you provide to us older sistas because now we know we are not forgotten just due to our age. Keep up the good work

I felt as uplifted as this commenter when I read her feedback as it let me know that older black women are locating my blog and finding useful information that inspires them to share their own experiences. It reaffirms the importance of having our own space that is mutually supportive and self-empowering.

### **9.5 Reflection on representation: The Activist**

On some occasions when stories about African Caribbean people—both within and beyond the UK, appear in the mainstream media, I feel the need to advance a different perspective on the story, frustrated by the manner in which history is framed within a particular discourse that legitimises violence and brutality and manages to problematize and racialise people of African descent, even when white Europeans are in actuality the 'other' as an unwelcome presence in African nations. One such occasion was a story published in the *Daily Mail* (Enoch, 2013) about government plans to compensate Mau Mau veterans for human rights

abuses during the colonial invasion of Kenya during the 1950s. I was disturbed by the framing of a violent military invasion, legitimised as a ‘British military campaign’ whilst the Mau Mau were described as ‘a militant African nationalist movement’. The whole story is framed around the Foreign Office, the potential cost to taxpayers if other former colonies lodge lawsuits and the official documents which went missing. Only towards the end of the story in four short paragraphs are the actual atrocities mentioned. The Mau Mau are decentred by whiteness and their suffering is marginalised. Having met some of the veterans in Kenya in 2007 whom I interviewed on a video camera, sharing their horrific suffering I felt that their stories needed to be told. So I wrote a post (Gabriel, 2013) and inserted a YouTube video of their testimonies, aiming to convey the depth of their suffering I had witnessed:

I interviewed many of the Mau Mau veterans, most of whom were elderly, frail, impoverished and still deeply mentally scarred by what they had endured. One woman was so traumatised that in recounting her experience she became very emotional and burst into uncontrollable sobs, and could no longer continue speaking to the camera.

I shed tears that day too, not least because as one of the surviving children of a Mau Mau veteran reluctantly acknowledged – ordinary Kenyans are still suffering because the British still occupy the land that was stolen from them and they are still living in poverty as a consequence of the loss of that land, and theft of their livestock.

They were forced to leave their homes with only the clothes on their backs and when it was over they were left with nothing. All their belongings had gone and their livelihoods and means of earning an income were a distant memory.

The post was just to establish context, the real story is told through the video testimonies of the Mau Mau veterans where they take centre stage, their voices are privileged and counter-narratives emerge.

### **9.5.1 Reflection on representation: The Academic**

Whilst most of the posts I have written are related to my experience of undertaking a doctoral research project, on rare occasions a story that catches my eye in the mainstream media causes me to digress and I feel have a moral obligation to offer an alternative perspective. As

someone who pays close attention to race equality in higher education through reading the latest reports and studies, I am intolerant of public officials who get their facts wrong. So when I came across an article in the *Independent* (Wright, 2012), comments made by MP Simon Hughes prompted a responsive post (Gabriel, 2012b). Below is an extract:

What does surprise me is the ill-informed and misleading comment by Simon Hughes. He is quoted in the *Independent* as saying:

‘Although there is evidence of improvement, there are still too few black youngsters who apply to university and particularly to the highest ranking universities.’

I would be interested to know exactly what ‘evidence’ Simon Hughes is referring to. His comment further adds to the destructive discourses on race that presents us as social problems and agents of our own disadvantage.

Such statements obscure the real picture concerning participation in higher education among the UK’s black population, allowing the government to side-step the real issues. It’s hard to understand why Simon Hughes does not show any interest in tackling the systemic racism that result in black graduates facing higher levels of unemployment.

A study published in 2009 by Paul Wakeling at the University of York called *Are ethnic minorities under-represented in UK postgraduate study*, reaffirms that higher numbers of ethnic minority students apply for university places than white students, although they have a lower success rate. But despite this – they still end up with higher admission rates than white students:

‘Qualitative research suggests that this success is contrary to racist stereotypes, evidence of ability and dedication to education as a means of self-improvement and social mobility.’ Sadly this dedication and commitment is not yielding any dividends for many of the UK’s young black graduates – but that does not make *them* the problem

My aim with the post was to demonstrate through evidence in the form of a research paper, that Simon Hughes’s statement to the press was contradictory to the facts. I wanted to



demonstrate that whilst black graduates are denied equal opportunities in the job market, his statement presented them as social problems of their own making through not attending university in large enough numbers. Although Hughes was the target of my wrath, I still hold the *Independent* accountable for sloppy journalism in not researching and presenting all the relevant facts.

### **9.5.2 Reflection on representation: The Fortysomething**

The majority of my posts are focused on my own experience and experiments with hair products, hair care routines, nutrition, exercise and clothes. The remainder are based on research around diet, nutrition, hair and beauty products. As such I rarely comment on stories in the mainstream about African Caribbean people. However, there was just one occasion when I did write a post about the British actress Marianne-Jean Baptiste who appeared in an edition of one of my favourite television shows with a dramatic new, natural hairstyle. In the same episode another black actress wore her hair in its natural, afro-textured state. It was celebratory in tone as this extract demonstrates (Gabriel, 2012a):

I was pleasantly surprised yesterday evening to see one of my favourite actresses, British-born Oscar nominee Marianne-Jean Baptiste, playing the role of Judge Patricia Seabrook in *Harry's Law* (season 2).

But what I enjoyed most, aside from her excellent acting was the short, natural hairstyle she wore so elegantly. She looked very slim in that episode, as if she has lost a lot of weight since I saw her in *Without a Trace*, playing the role of FBI agent Vivian Johnson.

In that show she wore her hair relaxed with different weaves. Whilst she looked great, for me she never looked as beautiful as she does with her hair worn natural.

On yesterday's episode of *Harry's Law*, there was another black actress sporting natural hair tied back in a neat pony tail. She played the role of a mother, who along with her African American husband had adopted a Chinese girl four years prior, whose parents came from China to claim their kidnapped daughter.

Unfortunately I do not know the name of this beautiful actress as she was not listed in the full cast on IMDB or on any other websites about the show I had time

to search. But it sure was great to see two beautiful black actresses wearing gorgeous natural hairstyles!

It is a short post aimed simply at highlighting the fact that black actresses in the US are no longer portrayed through European standards of beauty with long, straight, swishy hair. In reflecting a dramatic shift that has seen many black women, including celebrities resist chemical straighteners and hair extensions; it is no longer a rarity to see black actresses wearing their hair in its natural condition. Given many of my posts around that time were about natural hair, I felt it would be of interest to my audience and provide a little inspiration! Visuals are always very powerful and I managed to obtain two images of Baptiste: one with straightened hair and one with natural hair, to show the difference. It also sparked my interest given that Baptiste is a British actress who has been very successful in the US, securing leading roles in top American dramas, which eluded her in Britain.

## **9.6 Reflection on social impact: The Activist**

As a campaigning journalist and quasi-journalistic blogger, social aims are the main purpose for blogging. It's about trying to generate new levels of understanding through offering personal insights – that is my perception of what is said and how it is said, how people are framed, how stories are angled in a way that excludes or marginalises particular groups of people, and offering an alternative perspective. My post on the Mau Mau veterans is one such example. My intent is that my posts might have an impact at the individual level and through conversational learning (Baker et al, 2002) that different modes of understanding might be extended. Occasionally my posts have been picked up by organisations with the means to generate wide distribution. One such example is a post I wrote titled: *Race equality in the UK: why we still have a long way to go* (Gabriel, 2009), which ended up in *Issues Today* volume 29, *Racial Discrimination*. It's a book used as a teaching resource for KS3 pupils. I couldn't have hoped for a better outcome than for the article to be used within an educational setting, for pupils still in their formative years whose minds should be open to receiving new ideas. Social impact is of great importance to me and whilst there is no real way of knowing how my views are received, I live in hope that some people might be impacted by them.

### **9.6.1 Reflection on social impact: The Academic**

I definitely have social aims for my academic blog that are centred on teaching and learning. Since my posts are structured around my journey and experiences as a doctoral student, one

of my main hopes is that my posts are a source of inspiration for aspiring doctoral students, or research students at the beginning of their own journeys. Many of the posts cover the formal, institutional stages of a research project such as the interim assessment and gaining ethical approval. Others are more personalised and focused on the social experience of undertaking a PhD, such as whether it is life-changing, how to deal with the isolation and how to plan for the transition from completing a PhD to embarking on an academic career. I hope that by sharing my experiences and personal insights that students will benefit. Having bought books aimed at PhD students I have come to realise that the best way of becoming more knowledgeable, competent and confident is through everyday life experience. No textbook can really prepare you since institutional cultures vary from one university to another. Learning through the experience of others is, I believe a valuable resource. Some posts have attracted hundreds of readers whilst others, most notably the instructional ones around research methods, have attracted thousands. Most readers don't leave comments but the ones that do make the exercise worthwhile:

Your work is simple and clear that there are two research approaches, inductive and deductive, qualitative and quantitative approaches. You gave clear differences in a balance, simple to understand, I suppose you are a teacher by profession. This is how we share knowledge and you become more knowledgeable.

This commenter totally encapsulated what my whole approach is about – sharing knowledge. So whether I am helping five students or five hundred, I do feel my blog is making a social impact and that's very satisfying.

### **9.6.2 Reflection on social impact: The Fortysomething**

I do have social aims for my blog and I do hope that it will create some sort of impact. I am trying to recreate the sense of community I experienced through the online forum for black women and through the group I established for women over 40. My aims are to provide a platform to share personal insights with other women like me who might find them useful. I want to encourage other women to share their experiences and stories within a mutually supportive space. I also hope that other women will be inspired by my posts to try new things as I have been inspired through others to write them. Most of the comments that I have received – the only real indicator of the impact my posts have had, have come from women

in the natural hair community. But they at least assure me that even if only a handful of women feel inspired and enlightened, I am happy that my blog still has an impact.

## 9.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have used a fusion of critical ethnography and critical autoethnography as qualitative research methods to examine my perceptions of various dimensions of blogging that are directly linked to the research questions. Reflexivity is a key element of this approach and I have endeavoured to adopt the confessional reflexive style outlined by Foley (2002) in presenting my subjectivity through the constructed narratives of multiple others who I identify as The Activist, The Academic and The Fortysomething. In exploring these perceptions through alter egos I have exposed intersectional experiences of difference in highlighting the similarities and differences between raced, classed and gendered identities. This enriches cultural analysis by offering a broader social context through which to examine African Caribbean bloggers in the UK.

Reflection on motivation through multiple identities has uncovered voice and visibility as primary motivations for the Activist and the Academic and voice, visibility and empowerment as primary motivations for the Fortysomething. The analysis through multiple layers of consciousness exposes subtle differences between the Activist and Academic relating to the maintenance of a journalistic identity for the former and the cultivation of an academic identity for the latter. The motivations of the Fortysomething are revealed as being centred on establishing a collective presence for black women over 40 in the blogosphere as a means of empowerment.

Reflection on gratification uncovered voice and knowledge sharing as primary sources of gratification for the Activist and the Academic, whilst for the Fortysomething gratification is linked to knowledge sharing and social interaction. Distinct and differential experiences highlighted reveals that for the Activist, gratification is gained through the act of voicing in providing alternative perspectives primarily of the experiences of African Caribbean people in the UK. Whilst for the Academic gratification occurs through the articulation of an academic voice and sharing experiential knowledge gained through the day to day experiences as a doctoral student. Gratification for the Fortysomething is linked to sharing experiential knowledge gained through experimentation with hair and beauty products, hair care routines, nutrition, exercise and fashion. Gratification is a blended experience enhanced through feedback as social interaction.

Reflection on the role of race and ethnicity in the construction of online identities reveals that presenting a racial and ethnicity identity in the blogosphere is important to all three subjective selves. For the Activist and the Academic this is seen as a strategy to challenge negative stereotypes and to facilitate self and community representation. However, whilst the priority for the Activist is reclaiming a representational space for African Caribbean people by making them the central focus of journalistic narratives; for the Academic the priority is in countering stereotypical representations of African Caribbean communities. For the Fortysomething, authenticity is of primary importance to demonstrate belonging to the collective identity of black women over 40 enacted within an exclusive online space. In terms of cultivating audiences, whilst the Activist and Academic both target multicultural audiences as a means of initiating social change; the Fortysomething targets black women over 40, since motivation and gratification are linked to creating a sense of community within an exclusive space for this group.

Reflection on representation reveals that both the Activist and the Academic have been motivated to respond through their blog to representations of people of African descent in the mainstream. For the Activist it was to privilege the voices of Africans marginalised and misrepresented in a mainstream news article. For the Academic it was to counter misrepresentation of African Caribbean students represented as social problems. In contrast, for the Fortysomething, the interest is in highlighting African Caribbean people featured in the mainstream to enhance voice and visibility.

Reflection on social impact reveals that for the Activist, social aims are linked to offering personal insights around representation in the mainstream media and providing alternative viewpoints as strategies to initiate social change by generating new levels of understanding. For the Academic, social aims are linked to providing inspiration for students and offering personal insights as a form of experiential learning to a student audience. The Fortysomething also has social aims linked to inspiration and personal insights in a different context. She aims to inspire other black women over forty to experiment with lifestyle changes and to foster experiential learning within an exclusive online, community-oriented space.

These multiple narratives demonstrate motivations, gratifications and perceptions around racial and ethnic identity, representation and social impact in common with other participants as revealed in chapters six and seven. However, the layered accounts presented here offer deeper insights into the complex nature of multiple and intersecting identities. For example,

for the Academic and Fortysomething gender is a more dominant aspect of identity. In the case of the Academic, this is due to the knowledge and experience of marginalisation and invisibility within academia. Whilst for the Fortysomething, the invisibility of black women over 40 in the mainstream media and the blogosphere fuel a desire for collective identification. This chapter adds value to the findings of this research project by demonstrating the role society plays in shaping narratives, identities and lived experience through the examination of multiple blogging identities.

## Chapter 10: Conclusion

This study provides a nuanced understanding on the use of blogs by African Caribbean people in Britain as social, cultural and counterhegemonic practice through the theoretical frameworks of alternative media and critical race theory. The demographics of the participants are similar to the average blogger as revealed in research on the blogosphere over the last decade as well-educated people in their thirties, the majority being degree-educated. What differentiates this study from other research on bloggers is the use of a critical race approach that not only centres and privileges the voices of the participants but also acknowledges the socio-political and historical context in which they exist as an ethnic minority group in Britain. Within this context racism is deeply embedded in the fabric of society since the blogosphere both replicates and reproduces raced, classed and gendered inequalities. The aim of this study has been to investigate the impact of race and ethnicity on blogging activities with a specific focus on counterhegemonic practice. Existing research acknowledges a cultural shift towards personalised political activity (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Breindl, 2010) and the use of blogs for discursive activism (Moyo, 2011; Shaw, 2012; Steele, 2011). While this thesis complements current literature on the use of blogs as counterhegemonic practice it offers new levels of understanding within a black British context of the ways in which African Caribbeans use blogs to mediate against racism and marginalisation within British society.

Voice, visibility and empowerment are the primary motivations for blogging, with voice and visibility occurring as intersecting factors and representing a desire to be seen and heard in the public domain. What is clear from the findings is that while motivation for a few participants is intrinsic and linked to a journalistic interest, for several bloggers motivation is driven by extrinsic factors linked to issues of race and representation. For the latter, blogs are used to counter feelings of being voiceless and invisible as African Caribbean people in British society by challenging negative racial stereotypes and developing their own constructions of black identity. This is more pronounced for women bloggers impacted by intersecting factors of race and gender. Their astute observations speak to the routine manifestations of symbolic annihilation in the mainstream media. For these women, their exclusion from everyday representations of women serves to render the white female as emblematic of womanhood. Black women are not only decentred by hegemonic whiteness, they are nullified, rendered voiceless and invisible. However, blogs provide a public platform upon which black women and men can challenge hegemonic whiteness by constructing

alternative discourses as a form of resistance against socially constructed identities. As motivational factors voice and visibility represent communicative dimensions of the participants' lives and experiences that are negatively impacted by race. Blogs serve to mediate against racial inequalities in society through self-representation as counterhegemonic practice and discursive activism. The motivation for empowerment for some of the participants is driven by a need for self-efficacy linked to feelings of voicelessness and invisibility. For other female participants empowerment is linked to self-employment and blogs serve the dual purpose of promoting enterprise and fulfilling a need for self-expression. There is a common motivation among these women to use blogs for promoting their own businesses and for celebrating and highlighting other black businesses. This demonstrates an orientation of blogs that extends beyond an individual focus, challenging the common association of blogs with self-interest. These findings also demonstrate that race and ethnicity are deeply implicated in motivations for blogging and also influence blogging practices.

Voice, knowledge sharing, knowledge acquisition and social interaction are the primary gratifications for authoring blogs among the participants. There is interconnectedness between motivation and gratification in terms of the centrality of voice, suggesting that gratification helps to sustain the motivation for blogging. Voice is arguably one of the most powerful indicators of inclusion and participation within society. To be voiceless equates to being silenced, rendered insignificant and relegated to the margins of social existence. Both within the idealised Habermasian concept of the public sphere and in contemporary virtual spaces, white males dominate the realms of public communication resulting in the marginalisation of women and people of colour. As a medium for communication, blogs function as an important platform for voicing. Voicing in the blogosphere as counterhegemonic practice is both a form of discursive activism and a mechanism for discursive empowerment. The findings demonstrate that counterhegemonic practice is not exclusive to social movements and self-declared activists but is undertaken routinely by ordinary individuals and represents one of the myriad of ways in which ICTs mediate our lives. Knowledge is a major factor linked to gratification both in terms of sharing and acquisition. While personalised blogs are seen largely as mediums for self-expression, the findings highlight the use of the blogosphere as a conversational space and medium for learning and disseminating knowledge outside formal modes of education. The participants have a clear understanding of the distinction between expert knowledge and experiential knowledge and place value on the knowledge they have acquired through their lived



experiences as African Caribbean people in British society. Knowledge acquisition is closely linked to knowledge sharing and often occurs as a blended experience, enhanced by positive feedback. For some of the participants, gratification is clearly linked to content focused around black identity, the black experience, and black creativity and culture. Some of the women participants express knowledge acquisition in terms of a journey of self-discovery through which knowledge is gained both through the experiences of self and others. In common with motivations for blogging, the findings demonstrate the impact of race and ethnicity in gratification from authoring blogs and in influencing content production.

Blogs are used by the participants in complex ways to reconfigure and present their identities in public and private spaces online and to cultivate audiences. Great significance is attached to divulging racial and ethnic identity in the blogosphere linked to authenticity, challenging negative stereotypes and as a means of self and community representation. For the bloggers in this study, authenticity represents an authority to speak about issues concerning black communities that is gained through lived experience and is about shared perceptions and common understanding between members of an ingroup that denote a sense of inclusion. While authentic notions of black identity have been problematised and critiqued as essentialist (Hall, 1996; Marotta, 2001), claiming the right to articulate lived experience as a form of counter storytelling is a key principle of CRT. For the bloggers in this study authenticity as a dimension of blogging practice represents a presumed competence to speak about race and racism and to impart knowledge based on their unique perspectives that serve as counter-narratives to the dominant discourses that limit their voice and visibility. Authenticity in blogging practice is a tool against racial oppression that does not necessarily reflect the belief of a homogenous black identity or ‘real black experience out there in the world’ (Marotta, 2001:542). But rather it is one of the means by which blogs are used to explore, negotiate and define one’s own subjective reality that represents a basic human need. The findings suggest a shared perception with African American bloggers on the need to blog openly on issues of concern to African Caribbean communities as a moral obligation, termed *blogging while black*. However, the fundamental difference is that studies in the US suggest that black bloggers target predominantly black audiences (Pole, 2005); whereas the participants in this study clearly articulate an interest in cultivating ethnically diverse audiences. This suggests that the participants do not regard the blogosphere as a racially segregated space, but a medium that is more representative of Kellner’s (2000) conception of multiple spheres that overlap and intersect as part of a fluid and dynamic media ecosystem.

Challenging negative stereotypes in the mainstream media is an important motivational factor for divulging racial and ethnic identity. Many of the bloggers feel that as individuals their very presence as articulate writers who are successful in their respective fields represent a challenge to stereotypical perceptions in the public domain and help to counter internalised racism. Some of the participants use blogs as a means of representing themselves and African Caribbean communities as a strategy for challenging hegemonic whiteness in the blogosphere. These findings demonstrate that even among a group of bloggers who are writing on a diverse range of topics not specifically about race, there is a common understanding that race influences how they view the world, based on their histories and experience. In addition to their use as counterhegemonic practice, blogs also function as a medium for developing subjectivity; for exploring what it means to be an African Caribbean man or woman in British society.

The majority of participants are motivated to write blog posts when stories about African Caribbean people appear in the mainstream media and they demonstrate a clear understanding of the impact of race, class and gender in the representation of African Caribbean communities. In the case of black women, this is perceived as varying between exclusion and negative stereotypes centred on demonization and fantasy. There is a perception among male participants that they only attract the interest of the mainstream media when they conform to specific stereotypes. Both male and female bloggers in the study recognise that African Caribbean communities are often constructed as social problems in the mainstream media. The findings demonstrate how blogs are used as a public platform for disseminating personalised analyses and critiques of mainstream representation and advancing alternative viewpoints that challenge dominant discourses on the identity and experience of racialised minorities. As suggested in chapter four, African Caribbean bloggers take on the role of co-creators of Black History. This thesis therefore expands current literature on the use of blogs by racialised minorities by highlighting the important role they play in documenting social history that is currently under-utilised. This is of great significance given that historical archives in Britain often exclude people of colour or fail to capture the complexity and depth of their experiences and contribution to social, cultural and political life.

A key finding of this study is the importance attached to social aims by the majority of participants and how they use blogs to inspire others and provide personal insights and alternative viewpoints. This demonstrates objectives for blogging that go beyond personal

gratification that are linked to a desire to initiate social change and social aims directed towards African Caribbean communities. In this regard, blogs are not only a medium for discursive activism but a means by which individuals can contribute to the betterment of their communities. This demonstrates the use of the blogosphere as an alternative space through which empowered conceptions of African Caribbean communities are perpetuated. These findings are all the more remarkable given that the participants are not self-declared activists linked to a specific cause but individuals with diverse interests writing across a range of topics of which a tiny minority cover race and politics. Despite the individual orientation of blogs and the varied interests of the bloggers they share similar perspectives based on their experiences as African Caribbean people in British society. Some interpretations of Bourdieu's work adopt a deficit model, drawing on the concept of cultural capital as an explanation for unequal social and economic outcomes experienced by people of African descent. The implication is that they lack social and cultural capital necessary for social mobility. However, the deficit model emerges when cultural capital is narrowly defined by white, middle class values. Adopting CRT as a theoretical approach and placing people of colour at the centre of analysis demonstrates that 'multiple forms of cultural wealth' exists within the communities of racialised minorities (Yosso, 2005:70). The findings of this study also expand current literature on the blogosphere by demonstrating that African Caribbean bloggers are highly adept at appropriating blogs as a medium for harnessing cultural capital to enrich and empower their communities.

Baym & Markham (2008:xv) argue that 'credible research is driven by clearly defined questions and adaptability in answering them'. This research project presented epistemological and methodological challenges in terms of declaring myself as an actor in the research process as a long-term blogger and deciding how best to analyse and incorporate my own perspectives into the findings of this study. In chapter four I explained how my activities as a blogger inform the research process using virtual ethnography and cyberethnography, aided by the use of a reflective journal. These methods proved invaluable in capturing the complex sociocultural contexts that reflect shifting geographical and temporal boundaries within virtual spaces. However, the fusion of critical ethnography and autoethnography used in chapter eight was the most effective method for separating my voice from those of the participants while retaining the integrity of CRT. Analysing and presenting my personal reflections on blogging through the constructed narratives of multiple others

added an enriched layer of cultural analysis to the study by exposing the complex nature of blogging identities through intersectional experiences.

The blogosphere attracts a great deal of interest from researchers and there is a growing body of research exploring motivation and gratification and the variety of ways that blogs are used. However, the use of blogs by ethnic minority groups in Britain and the impact of race and ethnicity on blogging practice are under-developed areas of inquiry. As a consequence much of the research on the blogosphere reflects its use by the white majority population, leaving a gap in the literature on how ethnic minority groups engage with this medium. This is surprising since studies show that ethnic minority groups are at the forefront of new media take-up (OFCOM, 2008). As this study demonstrates, race and ethnicity are deeply implicated in motivation, gratification, the cultivation of audiences, identity construction in the blogosphere and content production and African Caribbean bloggers have social aims that are directed towards their own communities. The findings offer new levels of understanding on the impact of race and ethnicity in cultural production and counterhegemonic practice in the blogosphere. It demonstrates how personalised blogs are often externally focused and increasingly involved in discursive activism and community empowerment. In addition to filling gaps in the literature this study also highlights the potential of blogs to support advocacy organisations and community networks to harness and mobilise community action and support within the African Caribbean population. What has also emerged through the narratives of the participants is an insight into subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination that routinely go unnoticed as articulated through their individual experiences. In this regard, CRT has proved a successful approach in exposing racism as normalised and taken-for-granted and embedded within media practices. However, although this study offers new information on blogging practice in the UK and the impact of race and ethnicity in processes of cultural production, it has also exposed new areas for investigation. Future research is needed to investigate the disparity between media consumption and production among African Caribbean communities in the UK to determine what factors influence low consumption for example, of online news. While the participants in this study cultivate multicultural audiences it is clear that much of their activities in terms of knowledge sharing, challenging negative stereotypes and disseminating positive associations of black identity, life and culture are directed towards African Caribbean communities. Future research is therefore necessary to explore how African Caribbean communities engage with blogs as audiences. The scope of this study has been necessarily limited to blogs in order to effectively

cover multiple areas of inquiry. However, future research on other types of social media would be useful, especially given that advocacy and activism in the blogosphere is most successful when used alongside other social media platforms. Other limitations of this study are the low number of men in the sample which means the findings are more reflective of a female perspective. Future research is required with an equal ratio of male to female participants to enable gendered comparisons between bloggers. Male-only samples would also facilitate further exploration of black male identity and black masculinity which are themes that emerged through the narratives of two male participants in chapters seven and eight.

This study underlines the important role that bloggers and researchers can play as co-curators of social history and the potential use of such research in helping to enrich the historical archives in Britain and beyond. This thesis captures a historical moment in the lives of African Caribbeans in the UK, and also serves to deepen our understanding of racism in contemporary British society. While this thesis expands current literature on some of the ways in which ethnic minority groups engage with blogs in ways that differ from the white majority population, there are further areas that warrant investigation, as outlined in this chapter. However, this study provides a useful starting point for further exploration.

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## Appendix A: Sample Questionnaire

1.

First Name

Last Name

Town of Residence

2. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☒ Female

3. What was your age on 1 June 2012?

4. What is your ethnicity?

- ☒ Black African
- ☐ Black Caribbean
- ☐ Mixed African
- ☐ Mixed Caribbean
- ☐ Other Black ethnicity (please state below)

Please specify:

5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

6. How long have you been blogging?

- ☒ Less than 6 months
- ☐ 1 to 2 years
- ☐ 2 to 3 years
- ☐ More than 3 years

7. How often do you write and publish blog posts?

- ☐ At least once a week
- ☒ At least once a fortnight
- ☐ At least once a month
- ☐ At least once every three months

8. What do you find satisfying about blogging?

- ☐ Getting my views and opinions in the public domain
- ☒ Sharing my knowledge and expertise
- ☒ Learning new things whilst gathering information for a blog post
- ☐ Gaining recognition and respect
- ☐ Interacting with other bloggers
- ☐ Other (please state below)

Please specify: |

9. Of the statements you selected, which one do you find the most satisfying?

- ☒ Getting my views and opinions in the public domain
- ☐ Sharing my knowledge and expertise
- ☐ Learning new things whilst gathering information for a blog post
- ☐ Gaining recognition and respect
- ☐ Interacting with other bloggers
- ☐ Other (please state below)

Please specify: |

10. How do you interact with other bloggers?

- ☐ Through online forums for bloggers
- ☐ Through other online forums
- ☒ Through social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Blogged, etc.)
- ☐ By email
- ☐ I don't interact with other bloggers
- ☐ Other method (please state below)

Please specify: |

11. Which of the following topics do you blog about regularly?

- ☒ Business
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Politics
- ☐ Technology
- ☐ Health and fitness
- ☐ Health and beauty
- ☐ Hair
- ☐ Race
- ☐ Sport
- ☐ News and current affairs
- ☐ Music
- ☐ Creative writing/literature
- ☐ Feminism/women's issues
- ☐ Fashion
- ☐ Other (please state below)

Please specify: |

12. Which of the following statements reflect the use (s) of your blog?

- ☒ To write about topics that interest me (sport, politics, hair etc.)

- ☒ To share my knowledge and expertise of a specific subject
- ☐ To promote my business
- ☐ To promote my profession or career
- ☐ To comment/respond to news stories, radio and television programmes, or advertisements in media
- ☐ To comment on social or political issues in the wider society
- ☒ To record and share my personal thoughts and feelings
- ☐ To provide new information to the public from my own sources or research
- ☐ To share links to other blogs, websites, articles, videos etc.
- ☐ Other (please state below)

Please specify:

13. Which one describes the primary use of your blog?

- ☐ To write about topics that interest me (sport, politics, hair etc.)
- ☒ To share my knowledge and expertise of a specific subject
- ☐ To promote my business
- ☐ To promote my profession or career
- ☐ To comment/respond to news stories, radio and television programmes, or advertisements in media
- ☐ To comment on social or political issues in the wider society
- ☐ To record and share my personal thoughts and feelings
- ☐ To provide new information to the public from my own sources or research
- ☐ To share links to other blogs, websites, articles, videos etc.
- ☐ Other (please state below)

Please specify:

14. Have you ever published a post on your blog in response to something you read, listened to or watched in the media?

YES

## Appendix B: Sample Interview Transcript

- Deborah: How did you get involved in blogging – what motivated you?
- LEONA: I started reading a lot of blogs and just getting interested in the whole idea of blogging and I felt I had something to say and something to share and so that inspired my first blog which was about eight years ago.
- Deborah: Wow, a long time.
- LEONA: Yes, and you know and prior to that I had an online community back in the days of MSN groups and we'd share thoughts or events and things with people, so blogging seemed like a natural progression of that.
- Deborah: Right, Okay. What inspired you to create the particular blog you have today?
- LEONA: The blog that I have today is called ...and sometimes I refer to it as a love letter to the continent I'm from. The inspiration was to showcase a lot of the creativity and innovation that either comes out of Africa or is produced by people of African descent or even things that are inspired by Africa. And a key strand of my blog as well is an interview series where I interview mostly creative entrepreneurs and innovators who are doing something that they're very passionate about. The whole idea is to inspire people to follow their passions and to appreciate that you don't have to be a doctor or a lawyer or more traditional professions to make a good living and to be happy. That's one thing that I really want to promote via the blog.
- Deborah: Okay. Who is your intended audience? Who do you see as the people reading the blog?
- LEONA: I would say Africans both on the continent and in the Diaspora. If I had to give an age range I would say from 16 perhaps to 50 and people who are interested in the arts and culture and technology and innovation and entrepreneurship.
- Deborah: Okay. And how important is it for you for your audience to know that you're a black woman blogger?
- LEONA: I think it's very important because a lot of the content that I post is from my observation or things from my experience and those are directly coloured by who I am. So I think it's very important for that and also there's this whole question of representation and so I feel like I'm contributing to increasing the number of spaces there are for Africans and Diaspora Africans representing themselves and their culture and their experience. So it's extremely important.
- Deborah: Okay and in terms of what you get out of blogging, what you really enjoy; on the survey what you ticked to represent what you find most satisfying was learning new things whilst gathering information for a blog post. Can you talk a bit about that?

- LEONA: Yes. I think research and just exploring what's out there is one of the most exciting things about blogging. Because, you know, you do get introduced to so many things you may not necessarily have come across, so that's a real driver. On another level it's nice to be in a position where you can let people know about these things and get them excited and share interesting, thought-provoking things that they wouldn't have come across. So you're sort of a curator and it expands your own knowledge.
- Deborah: Okay. Talking about the use of your blog, something that you added to the questionnaire was that you use it to promote African creativity from the continent and the Diaspora. You spoke about that earlier, why is that so important to you to use the blog for that purpose?
- LEONA: For one, in the Diaspora, because African arts and culture are not mainstream, the blog and the internet is one avenue to really give exposure to all the great work that is being created. And even for audiences in Africa because there is not a great value placed on the arts and culture in many places; I've had emails from people on the continent saying oh that they didn't know that this was happening in their backyard, thanks for highlighting this. So I think there's not much attention given to African arts and culture generally so this is one platform that I can use to do that.
- Deborah: Okay and when you say there's not a lot of attention, are you meaning that within Africa there's not a lot of attention or value placed on the arts or are you meaning that in the UK there's not a lot of focus on African art in the mainstream media?
- LEONA: Both, really.
- Deborah: Okay and how important is feedback to you as a blogger?
- LEONA: It's really encouraging, for example the fact that I do the blog in my spare time or just for my own enjoyment, sometimes it's easy to push it aside because something else has to get done to do with work or personal commitments. Knowing that people are enjoying and waiting for and interacting with the blog is very encouraging for those moments when you're not so motivated to post. So that's a really important thing and as well, through the blog and related activities, I've had the opportunity to meet a lot of like-minded people and that's been a great experience in terms of friendship, in terms of expanding my knowledge, or interrogating so feedback in that response is very valuable.
- Deborah: Right. Because I noticed also in the survey you said that you interact with other bloggers through social networking sites. How important would you say that interaction with other bloggers is to you?

LEONA: I'd say it's very important. You feel like you're part of a community with similar goals and ambitions, so that's very encouraging. And also it goes back to the thing about gathering information for the blog. By interacting with these other people, it sparks new thinking or new avenues to look down and that helps generate content for the blog.

Deborah: Okay and how important is to you to have lots of people following your blog?

LEONA: My thinking has changed slightly and only because I've been posting more lately and getting more readers and followers and it is a good feeling and it is motivating, so I would say that it is quite important. Just in terms of pushing you to keep going, to perhaps develop what you're offering to people to see how much more value you can add to them. And as well, thinking long term, because I really enjoy it I would love for it to be able to generate money. That would facilitate me spending even more time working in it. So I know that for that to happen having a big readership is key.

Deborah: Right. Okay. And how important is it for you to feel that your blog is somehow making a difference in society?

LEONA: That's very important to me. As idealistic as it might sound, I do want to make a positive change for the place that I come from and the people I relate to. So it is very important to me that people are getting value that's helping them to see things differently or make a positive change in their lives or be more conscious about their impact on the world and their environment. So that is extremely important to me; I would say that's probably the most important thing.

Deborah: Okay and how do you think that your blog and blogs in general can make the most kind of social impact?

LEONA: I think on one hand it's putting new ideas or ways of thinking out there or giving exposure to things that people might not have thought about or come across. As opposed to example, a magazine, blogs tend to be quite personal and bloggers tend to share a lot of their personal experiences, struggles, challenges, etc. so I think that kind of human element is really valuable in terms of bloggers can be an example to others and by sharing what they've learned or challenges they've overcome, that can inspire others who might be in similar situations or who are doing similar things. So I think that personal element really helps in enabling readers to resonate and feel that this is somehow relevant to their life.

Deborah: Right. That's very insightful. The last question is related to the question in the survey that asked whether you'd ever published a blog post in response to something that you came across in the mainstream media. I just wondered if you could think of any examples?

- LEONA: There's one example I can think of. It's a post I created inspired by an event I went to along the lines of issues that have been discussed in particular media and it was to do with why there are so few black creators. I went to a conference in Manchester and it was a design conference and the first of what has now become an annual event. It had some very influential speakers there and at least 200 people in the audience and my one observation was that I was the only black female and from what I saw I think the only black person period. So I wrote a post and it was titled: Five reasons why design matters, an argument for African parents and other sceptics.
- Deborah: Okay. Have you ever come across anything in the *mainstream media* in Britain, either on television or in the newspaper or in a magazine that was about African Caribbean people whether it was something positive or negative you read or watched that inspired you to post, or whether it was something negative – *have you ever done a blog post around anything like that?*
- LEONA: I can't think of anything right now.
- Deborah: That's okay. Is there anything that you think I've missed that you want to add?
- LEONA: Not that I can think of.
- Deborah: That's absolutely fine. Thanks very much.

## Appendix C: Ethical Approval



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22 May 2012

Deborah Gabriel  
University of Salford

Dear Deborah

**Re: Ethical Approval Application – CASS110024**

I am pleased to inform you that based on the information provided, the Research Ethics Panel have no objections on ethical grounds to your project.

Yours sincerely

**Deborah Woodman**  
**On Behalf of CASS Research Ethics Panel**